

Slytherin Rising Part One: Sleeping Death

by J. L. Matthews

Chapter One A Mysterious Letter

July, 1989. Somewhere in suburban Surrey.

The summer holidays were always a drag, but this year they seemed worse than usual, Luella Martin thought to herself. Not even her best friend Deanna Tyler's lively suggestions on what they could both get up to could cheer her up.

"Come on, Lu, we've got to do something! I'm bored, you're bored, so let's go and amuse ourselves. I'll bring some tapes, you get your tape player, we'll spend the afternoon by the river and chill."

"We always do that. All summer. Every summer. I'm not in the mood," Luella said, depressed.

Deanna stopped pacing around and looked at her friend, who was sat on her bed looking fed up. Luella's normally round, cheerful face, framed by dark brown hair and dominated by clear blue eyes, looked dull and apathetic.

"Spit it out, Lu. What's bothering you? As if I can't guess."

Luella looked her in the eye. "Nothing's bothering me. I'm fine." She gestured dramatically. "After all, I've only got my best friend in all the world, my best mate since childhood, heading off to some expensive boarding school in September to make lots of new friends and forget all about me." She got up. "What do I care if I have to stay behind at some poxy grammar school, which is miles from my house and where I know absolutely no one? How am I going to deal with all that, going to a new school, making new friends, without my best friend with me?" Luella turned away, her face buried in her hands.

Deanna walked over to her and slipped her arms around her. She hadn't expected Luella to take it this badly. Yet on reflection, what had she expected? Luella and Deanna had known each other for years. They lived in the same street and had grown up together. Deanna's mother, bringing up her daughter on her own, had been glad of the support the Martins had offered when she moved in, and the two girls had spent a lot of time together as a result. It could have easily ended up with the two of them hating each other, but for some reason, they hit it off immediately. They discovered they had similar personalities, a shared delight for mischief, and perhaps most significantly, neither of them were like anyone else they knew. For example, things just seemed to happen around them both. Things flew off shelves or fell off walls from time to time. Or disappeared entirely. Then there was that time when both of them managed to get themselves trapped in a locked cupboard at school, without opening the door first. Their teachers were regularly furious with them, and Mr. and Mrs. Martin were always wondering why their daughter couldn't be normal like everyone else. Mrs. Tyler, on the other hand, seemed to tolerate her child's antics with an attitude of amusement. But then, she wasn't exactly normal herself. An eccentric

young Welsh widow with a mysterious job in London that occasionally required her to disappear at short notice for days at a time leaving Deanna with the Martins, her house was a regular treasure trove of candles, incense, the family owl Grendel, crystals, weird objects with no apparent purpose, normal objects which did anything but normal things and books with titles like *Dancing the Dark: My Life as an Aurora* by Penelope Moonfalcon, *Dark Wizards and Witches of the 20th Century* by Burke and O'Reilly (19th ed.), and *Counter Curses for all Occasions* by Ninianne Paracelsus. The "village witch", she was called behind her back, and Luella at least had often wondered whether it might not be true. Deanna, however, accepted all this as normal. It was the rest of the world she'd always thought was strange. Whereas Luella had only been able to wonder if she really belonged here, Deanna had always known she hadn't. And this was the source of their current disagreement.

Deanna had been down for her mother's old school since she was a child. Luella, needless to say, was attending the local high school. This might not have been an insurmountable problem for two normal girls, but Luella and Deanna were not normal. The other schoolchildren had always picked on them and tormented them, or at best, ignored them. All they'd really had was each other. And now...

"Now I won't even have that!" Luella was sobbing. "I never minded being the odd kid no one liked, because at least the two of us were odd kids together. Now what do I do?"

Deanna looked on, helpless to do anything but dry her friend's eyes. "Lu, I'm sorry! I really am. I'd like nothing better than for you to come to Hogwarts too. I really think you'd like it there. But if you're not down for it, they won't take you. I'm really sorry."

"Not sorry enough to tell your mum you're not going," Luella observed tartly.

Deanna wrung her hands guiltily. "Lu, I'm sorry, but... that's not an option. If only I could explain..." She leant back, sighing. "If only I could explain what Hogwarts means to me! Ever since I was little, Mum has told me about Hogwarts, and what it's like. It's been my hope, my dream to go there. A whole school, full of people like, well..." She looked apologetic. "People like me, basically. And Mum. Having to live in a narrow-minded little town like this, put up with those idiots at school, and adults who just don't understand..." She looked at Luella, desperately pleading with her to understand. "It's all that's kept me going at times, knowing that this place is not my real home, not my real community. That when I was eleven years old, I'd go off to Hogwarts, and get a proper education with my real people. That is what has really kept me sane, that I can escape! Lu, I care about you deeply, and I really value your friendship, but I cannot give up my dream! Not for anything!" She took a deep breath and carried on, "Not even you. I'm sorry, but there it is. I hope you understand."

Luella had stopped crying, but her mood hadn't improved. Now she just looked bitter.

"Oh, I understand all right. You care more about your precious Hogwarts Academy than your best friend!" she snapped. "Well, if that's how you feel, then fine! But don't expect me to be your friend still and hang around with you, and act like everything is lovely. Because it isn't, and I just don't want to see you anymore! Now get out!"

Deanna got up. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it again. There didn't seem to be any point arguing. If Luella wanted to be stupid about this, then let her. It wasn't like she wouldn't meet new people at Hogwarts after all. Deanna turned and left. The door was slammed shut behind her. A lump in her throat and a prickling sensation in her eyes, Deanna walked home.

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A few days passed. In their separate homes, Luella spent as much time as possible shut in her room, listlessly going along with her parents' plans for the new school year, while Deanna... actually, Deanna was doing much the same thing, if she had but known it.

Deanna's mother, a slenderly built honey-blonde witch with mischievous brown eyes and a charming smile that concealed most effectively the steely core within, was planning her only child's forthcoming departure with an efficiency bordering on military. Although given that she did actually work for the nearest thing the magical world had to an army, that wasn't entirely unexpected.

"Let me see," Caitlin Tyler murmured, idly tracing the school list in front of her with the end of a rather expensive looking quill pen. "Cauldron, scales set, robes, three sets thereof, telescope, about five textbooks, and of course, a wand. Hecate, this is going to be expensive. What do they think we are, made of money?"

"We are, aren't we?" asked Deanna, her mind elsewhere as she stared out of the window at the Martin's house.

"Well, yes, but that's not the point," said Caitlin. "What about those without much money? The Weasleys for example: Arthur and Molly have got two starting this year, how are they going to manage?"

"Who cares?" shrugged Deanna. "They're not us."

"Deanna!" her mother warned her. "Don't be so selfish."

"I'm not being selfish," Deanna replied. "I just don't know them as well as you, that's all."

"I don't know them that well," Caitlin admitted. "I just see Arthur at work sometimes. But that's hardly the point. You should be nice to those less fortunate."

"Mother, if you really wanted to be nice to them, you'd offer to buy their kids' Hogwarts stuff," Deanna pointed out, not entirely unreasonably.

"They'd never accept it," Caitlin said, returning her attention to the school list.

"Their problem then, isn't it?" Deanna replied, indicating that that was the end of it. Caitlin had to admit that there was a certain logic to that. However, she didn't think it would be a good idea to let her daughter know that. Changing the subject, she asked,

"So how's Luella then? Coping well with everything? All the upheaval of a new school, must be difficult for her. Wonder how her family are taking it."

"Absolutely fine," Deanna replied, stony-faced. "Making plans and buying her uniform right now. That tutor her parents hired got her through the eleven-plus, so off to Tiffin Girls School she goes."

"Tiffin?" Caitlin laid down her quill, a rather perplexed look on her face. "She never mentioned anything about going away to boarding school at all?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. Should she have done?"

Caitlin leaned back in her velveteen dark green armchair, frowning. "That's odd. She should have heard by now..." She sat upright, fixing Deanna with a stare that suddenly filled the girl with an irresistible urge to start fidgeting. "Are you sure she's had no offers from any other school?"

"I think Kingston Grammar were interested too, why?" Deanna asked, her curiosity piqued. Sitting upright, as opposed to lounging vertically on the sofa, she returned her mother's gaze without so much as a blink. "Mum, what's going on, do you know something I don't?"

"Not know exactly," Caitlin said, deep in thought. "Just something I suspected. Maybe I was wrong. I mean, I suppose I could be wrong, but... I'll have to see if I can't check a few records at the Ministry, or maybe hit up Albus for some information, but I always thought..." Her voice trailed off.

"Ministry records??" Deanna asked, now totally confused. "Why would Lu and her family have Ministry records, they're Muggles!" Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "They are Muggles, aren't they?"

"Her parents are, certainly," Caitlin replied. "But about Luella, I am not so sure."

Deanna found herself lost for words as one of the pillars of her reality began to tremble. "But Mum, she can't be, she's just a Muggle kid, where would she have inherited her powers from?"

"I couldn't even begin to tell you," Caitlin said distantly. "But this I do know, magic can appear spontaneously in any Muggle family. You don't need to be pure- or even half-blood to do magic."

And with those words, one of Deanna's main beliefs finally dissolve and came crashing to the ground. *Some Muggle kids can do magic. We're not a breed apart.* Swiftly followed by *if some Muggles can do magic too, then why not Lu?*

"You think she's one of us." Deanna shot to her feet. "You think she's one of us, don't you!" She began to pace the floor, becoming increasingly agitated. "Oh my gods, she could be coming to Hogwarts too. Mum, we have to go over there, there's so much she doesn't know, she's probably not even been told yet, Mum, we have got to get over there!" she cried. Overcome with desperation, she headed for the door.

Realising that her daughter was serious, Caitlin leapt from her seat, covered the few feet between her and Deanna with ease and grabbed her arm.

"Deanna, you can't!"

Deanna spun round, jet black eyes flashing in fury.

"Why not? I've got to tell her, she can't go on not knowing!" she demanded.

"Yes," said Caitlin through gritted teeth, "but you can't just go storming over there! These things need time. They need diplomacy. They need to go through the official channels, for a start! We don't even know if it's true yet."

Deanna sagged, the fire going out of her. "Suppose you're right," she muttered. "So when will we know then?"

Releasing her, Caitlin walked over to the mirror hanging on one wall and tapped it with one end of a tapering wand of finest ash wood. "*Revelatio!*"

The mirror misted up, before clearing to reveal the Martins' front room, in which Luella and her parents appeared to be having the mother and father of all rows, before a vase on the mantelpiece exploded and Luella turned and stormed off. On the table were some rolls of what looked suspiciously like parchment not entirely dissimilar to Deanna's book list.

Caitlin banished the picture with a word and sheathed her wand.

"I think that just answered your question."

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Luella was lying upstairs on her bed when her mother knocked on the door.

"Luella! Luella! Come downstairs at once! Your father and I need to talk to you." Muttering, Luella rolled off the bed and followed her mother downstairs. This did not sound promising. Mrs. Martin never referred to Mr. Martin as "your father" unless she was in trouble. A look at her mother's face confirmed it. Mrs. Martin, normally a friendly, attractive woman in her early forties, had a very firm look on her face which clearly indicated that she had a lot of explaining to do. What it could be about, Luella had no idea. She went into the Martin's comfortable middle-class sitting room and sat down on the plush green three-piece suite. Mr. Martin, a balding, slightly overweight man with the same brown hair and blue eyes that all the family had, was holding what looked like a scroll. A couple of letters lay on the table, except that certainly wasn't A4 they were written on. They were rolled up for a start.

"Luella, what exactly is the meaning of this?" Mr. Martin's voice carried a mixture of both irritation and confusion. Luella, apprehensive, took the letter from him and read.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Martin,

We are pleased to inform you that your daughter Luella has been selected to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We appreciate that this may come as a shock to you, however there is no doubt in our minds that Luella has natural magical ability, and is an ideal candidate for Hogwarts. While mindful of the fact that she is your daughter and her education yours to choose, we would like you to consider that if she does not attend Hogwarts, she will never learn how to use her powers appropriately, and they will be liable to erupting on occasions, particularly when your daughter is upset, angry, or otherwise emotionally excited. This tendency will increase as she gets older and her powers grow stronger. We therefore strongly recommend that you allow your daughter to attend Hogwarts, and return the attached reply slip to the address below. We enclose some literature about the school to enable you to make your choice. If you require assistance, please tick the appropriate box on the form and a member of our staff team will be pleased to visit you and answer any questions you may have. We hope to receive a reply by 1st August 1989.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Luella looked up, stunned. Hogwarts School? Surely not that place Deanna was going to? Witchcraft and Wizardry? Natural magical powers? But that could only mean...

"I'm a witch?" Luella asked faintly.

Her parents looked at each other. They didn't look happy.

"Luella, is this some kind of a joke?" Mrs. Martin asked. "Witches don't exist, surely you know that? I know you wanted to go to this Hogwarts place that Deanna is going to, but really, writing a letter saying you've been selected? And why add the witchcraft bit?"

"Mum, Dad, I didn't write it! You know my handwriting, that's not it! It's not Deanna's either," she added quickly. It was exactly the sort of thing Deanna would do, but all the same, she didn't think even Deanna would go this far. And witchcraft? Surely not... but the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. All the strange things that she and Deanna had been able to do. The way they'd always felt not only different from everyone else, but somehow as though they were the same. And let's face it, Mrs. Tyler's lifestyle was hardly conventional. It was not difficult to believe she was a witch. Nor was it hard to believe Deanna had inherited her powers. But surely not her? Her family was as conventional as it was possible to get. How could she possibly be a witch?

"I promise you, I don't know anything about it, this is the first I've heard of it." She felt herself trembling. "I know Hogwarts is the name of Deanna's school, but honestly, I didn't know it had anything to do with magic! Really!"

Her parents looked sceptical. Mr. Martin was first to speak. "Well, if you say you don't know anything, then I believe you, but all the same, we're not happy about this."

"Witchcraft and Wizardry, indeed!" Mrs. Martin exclaimed. "What sort of fools do they take us for? Obviously some kind of stunt to lure innocent children away from their parents for Lord only knows what end. Well, they can forget it. You most certainly are not going."

She made to throw the package of documents away.

"No!" cried Luella, making a grab for them. "You can't! You can't not let me go there! Deanna's going, and if she can, why can't I?"

"Mrs. Tyler has the right to educate her daughter however she sees fit," Mr. Martin said stiffly. "And, as that letter reminds us, so do we. And if you think we're letting you disappear off to goodness knows where, you've got another think coming."

"And even if it was real and not a joke..." Mrs. Martin added.

"IT IS REAL!" Luella shouted, "Deanna's going, I keep telling you!"

"And even if it was real," Mrs. Martin continued, "do you really think you're studying witchcraft? It sounds quite dangerous. No, we think you're better off here."

"I don't believe this," Luella said, furious. "My one chance at getting out of this hellhole, of doing something constructive with my life, and you won't let me go! You're always spoiling my fun, always telling me what to do with my life, and I've had enough. You're not stopping me going to Hogwarts!" she shouted. A vase standing on the mantelpiece exploded, sending shards of china everywhere. Mr. and Mrs. Martin looked at its remains, open mouthed. Mr. Martin looked at Luella with a mixture of fear and anger. Luella stared back defiantly. "Go to your room. We'll discuss it later." he said.

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Luella turned and left. She was a witch. She had power. She was only eleven years old, and didn't know any spells, but she had the power. "I'm a witch, a witch!" she whispered to herself. Wait until Deanna hears this, she thought. All resentment forgotten, she could only imagine going to Hogwarts, learning magic, casting spells, having fun with Deanna. *Mrs. Tyler must be a witch too, she'll understand how important it is. She'll talk them round.*

She was halfway up the stairs when the doorbell rang. Turning round, she scrambled down the stairs and went to answer it.

Deanna was first to push inside, although once in, she just stopped and stared at Luella as if seeing her for the first time. "Well?" she asked. "Is it true?"

No need to ask what she meant. Their recent quarrel forgotten, Luella found herself smiling.

"Yeah," she whispered. "It is."

"I thought as much," Caitlin Tyler's voice said dryly as she edged inside. She too was looking at Luella with new eyes, but there was no surprise there. *She knows, and has known for a long time*, Luella realised. Somehow, the thought cheered her.

"May I take it your parents were a little shocked by the news?" Caitlin asked.

"You could say that," Luella admitted. "Mrs. Tyler, they won't let me go! Please, Mrs. Tyler, you're one too, aren't you? You can tell them it's real and not dangerous, can't you? Please?"

Deanna was shocked. "Not... not go?" She faltered, turning to her mother. "Mum, she can't not go! You said it yourself over breakfast, if Hogwarts wants you, you've got to go. Mum, you've got to make them see sense, you've got to!"

"I'll do my best," Caitlin promised, as Luella's mother arrived. She did not look happy.

"Is this anything to do with you?" she demanded, brandishing Luella's Hogwarts letter. Caitlin groaned inwardly. Time to play innocent.

"Is what anything to do with me?" she asked sweetly.

"This!" snapped Mrs. Martin, thrusting the letter into her hands. "This... witchcraft nonsense!"

Caitlin glanced down at her outfit ruefully. It wasn't exactly her most sorcerous attire, consisting of trainers, jeans, a white vest and a blue hooded top. She never had liked robes much.

"Do I look like a witch to you?" she asked with a laugh.

Mrs. Martin had to admit she didn't. "But Hogwarts is your daughter's school, is it not?" she flung back, not to be put off.

"Yes. It is, or soon will be." Caitlin abandoned the pretence and looked Mrs. Martin straight in the eye. "*There is nothing to be afraid of*," she said quietly, seeming to Luella to be concentrating unusually hard. And to her surprise, her mother's demeanour seemed to change at once, as the anger drained out of her.

"Caitlin, is it true?" she whispered, shaking all over. "Is she really a witch?"

Caitlin passed the letter back. "If you were sent one of these, then yes she is. But truly, Celia, it is nothing to be afraid of." Caitlin took Mrs. Martin's arm tenderly. "Come on, let's talk." She turned to the two girls. "You two run off and do whatever eleven year olds do. Don't get into mischief, you hear me?" With that, she led Luella's mother into the living room, closing the door behind her.

Luella watched as they left, desperate to know what was going to happen, which way her future was going to turn.

"Do you think she'll convince them?" she asked Deanna anxiously.

Deanna just rolled her eyes. "Duh. She's a witch. Course she'll do it. You saw what she can do. Face it Lu, your parents don't stand a chance."

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Mr. Martin looked up as the two women entered, swiftly covering his inner worries with his most officious persona. Yes, he was worried sick about Luella and terrified some maniac was after her, but that didn't mean half the neighbourhood needed to know it.

"Ah, Caitlin. Just the woman we were looking for. I was wondering if you could shed any light on this whole Hogwarts thing. I gather Celia has already told you all about it."

"She has." Caitlin took a seat, gearing up for battle. Even though she didn't doubt the outcome, that didn't mean she was looking forward to it.

"And?" Mr. Martin demanded. "Is there anything to it or not?"

"She says it's true," Mrs. Martin said, close to tears as she almost fell into the seat alongside Caitlin.

"What?" cried Mr. Martin, outraged. "Caitlin, I thought you had more sense. You're not seriously telling me you believe in this witchcraft rubbish?"

Ever so slowly, Caitlin turned to face him dead on. "You don't need to believe in what you use every day, Terry. I couldn't do my job without it. In fact, wouldn't have to do my job without it. That letter's true, every word of it. I know the author personally." She smiled rather sardonically. "Congratulations, Terry, Celia. You've got a witch in the family."

Mr. Martin looked distinctly unimpressed. "Now look here, Caitlin, we were hoping you'd lay this nonsense to rest once and for all. There's no such thing as witches."

Mrs. Tyler's smile faded. "No such thing, is there?" she said softly. Getting up, she reached into her jacket and produced her wand. Somehow, this simple gesture had a way of fixing the attention of both Muggles in a way all the fancy words couldn't, as the physical presence of something that couldn't really have any other purpose than magic made it all utterly, totally, real. Caitlin cast her eye on the remains of the vase Luella had smashed earlier. "Luella's broken an ornament, has she? I used to do that quite a bit too. My mother took to buying things purely for me to break. Relieved she was, when I turned eleven and she could pack me off to school. Allow me." She pointed the wand at the vase's remains and called out "*Reparo!*" The pieces of the vase gathered from all corners of the room and flew together. The vase glowed for a bit then stopped. Mrs. Martin got up to examine it. "The vase!" she gasped. "It's completely mended!"

"Let me see that." Mr. Martin demanded. He examined it too, then turned on Caitlin. "How did you do that?" he whispered, in a mixture of awe, fear and fury.

Caitlin remained unmoved. "I told you. I'm a witch. I do magic. That is what I do for a living, what I have been trained to do. And is there any explanation for what you have just seen than magic?"

The Martins shook their heads, openmouthed. Smiling grimly, Caitlin got to her feet and began pacing the room, no longer looking anything like the young mother she normally affected to being, but like some ancient and powerful sorceress stepped straight from the annals of myth.

"Magic exists. Witches exist. They can be born into any family, ranging from old magical families stretching back for generations like mine, to the most conventional, unmagical families, like yours. Deanna is a witch, so am I, so were all my mother's family. We all went to Hogwarts, Deanna will attend it this year. Luella is also a witch. And it is in her best interests that she goes also. Look at that vase. You don't think it will stop there? She's reaching adolescence, the time when a witch's power is at it's most volatile and uncontrollable. She needs to be in an environment where it can be tamed, and channelled into productive activities. An environment where there are more experienced mages to guide her. Where people are used to strange goings on and where she will not feel isolated and the odd one out. In short, Hogwarts." Caitlin caught her breath and looked at them. "She will not be happy anywhere else. You know that, don't you? She will either repress her power and be unhappy, or express it and be declared insane or worse. The choice is yours, but I hope you'll make the right one."

Mrs. Martin was first to speak. "I don't want her to get hurt..." she faltered. Caitlin nodded, coming to sit next to her again.

"I know," she said softly, taking Mrs. Martin's hand in hers. "I know, I don't like seeing Deanna hurt either. But you won't be able to keep her cocooned in your cosy middle-class home forever. One day, there will come a time when you won't be able to protect her, and she'll get hurt. Studying magic is no different from anything else in that regard. And I think that she will be less unhappy at Hogwarts than out of it."

Mrs. Martin nodded sadly, shooting a knowing glance at her husband. "That's all I want for her, to be happy. Honestly, she's such a strange, fey child at times, as if she's in another world entirely. I don't know how she'll cope with it all."

"Too right," Mr. Martin added with a sigh. "I love her dearly, but I certainly wouldn't say I understand her. I know that's a terrible thing to say about your own daughter but it's true."

"Well, at least now you know why," Caitlin said. "She's a witch, always has been. Your world is not hers, and I know it's painful to accept, but she doesn't really belong here. She should go to Hogwarts. It'll be for the best."

The Martins exchanged glances, coming to the same, mutual decision with heavy hearts. It would be for the best, as Caitlin said. Deep down, they'd always known Luella was different. At least this way she'd be happy.

"Well, if what you say is true, then I suppose we'll have to let her go. You're sure she'll be safe?" Mr. Martin asked, wanting to get that last point settled once and for all.

"Quite safe," Caitlin reassured her. "I would not be sending my own daughter there if I thought there was any danger."

The Martins looked at each other. "Well, if you're sure... we'd better send her then. She'll only complain otherwise." Mrs. Martin sighed. "Where do we get her uniform and things from?"

"More to the point, how much is this going to cost me?" Mr. Martin said, irritably. Now that things were actually settled, his accountant's mind was getting to grips with the practicalities.

"Hogwarts does not charge it's students any fees. All you pay for is the cost of school items such as stationery, a uniform, wand, set textbooks, that sort of thing. I daresay you'll receive a list when you've sent your reply slip back. As for actually buying them," here Caitlin really turned on the charm, "I need to travel to London to get Deanna's things anyway, why don't I take Luella? I'm sure she'd enjoy the trip. Save you the bother." She smiled her best Hollywood smile.

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Awfully good of you, I hope she won't be too much trouble for you."

"Oh, of course not, no trouble at all," Caitlin purred, inwardly relieved that things had gone so well. She'd been fully prepared for a fight, but no, they'd given in quite gracefully. *Luella, your parents are a credit to you*, she thought. She just hoped that, despite all her earlier confidence, things would turn out as happily as she'd made out.

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On the other side of the door, Deanna and Luella gave each other a high five followed by an impulsive hug.

"We're going to Hogwarts together! I don't believe it!" Luella whispered.

"You better believe it, mate," Deanna grinned back. "Welcome, my friend, to the world of magic!"

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Chapter Two Diagon Alley

A week later, and Caitlin was leading the two girls up Charing Cross Road, London. It was one of those rare summer days when the sun was out and the temperature in the mid-twenties. Normally, Luella lived for days like this, but normally, she wasn't in the middle of the big city, breathing in the traffic fumes and labouring in the heat which, unadulterated by greenery, was far fiercer than she was used to.

"Are we nearly there yet?" she moaned, longing for shade, a cool breeze and a very cold drink.

"Not far now," said Caitlin, sounding as weary as Luella felt. "We're nearly there. Gods, how I hate London sometimes."

"Where are we going anyway?" Luella asked. For all the build-up, she still didn't know exactly where this place was. Or for that matter, what it was.

"You'll see," Caitlin told her.

Deanna, who until now had remained uncharacteristically quiet, chose this moment to speak up.

"We're going to Diagon Alley. It's Magic Central. Where everyone gets their magical supplies from. There's a secret entrance just up here somewhere."

"Oh, Deanna, you've spoiled the surprise," Caitlin pouted. "Never mind. We're here now anyway." She stopped outside a medieval looking pub called the Leaky Cauldron. "In here, children," she trilled as she slipped inside.

Luella hesitated. "Are we allowed in here?" she asked Deanna anxiously.

"Yeah, don't worry," Deanna yawned. "You'll be fine." She indicated for Luella to go ahead. Taking a deep breath, Luella did so.

The sight that greeted her was amazing. It looked like an old country pub, with wooden timbers everywhere, leather seating, closed-in old-fashioned booths, and pumps on the bar serving unusual and elsewhere unheard of beers. So far, so normal. What was different, however, was the clientele. Luella expected pubs to be full of old men with pipes, drinking beer. And this one was. However, they didn't normally wear star spangled robes and pointy hats, and Luella was sure that pipe smoke was not meant to be green. Well, if she hadn't believed in magic before, she certainly did now. A few of them looked up, but gave neither her nor Deanna a second glance. Caitlin, however, dressed in a terracotta strapless top, jeans and a pair of cowboy boots, was attracting more than her fair share of attention, although oddly enough, no one seemed to want to catch her eye.

Deanna seemed unmoved by it all, having obviously seen it all before, and chose a seat by the window. Luella joined her.

"What is this place?" Luella whispered, thrilled.

"The Leaky Cauldron," Deanna whispered back. "Magic pub. We're allowed in here, the magical community has a fairly relaxed attitude to licensing laws. Muggle policemen can't even see this pub anyway, so we're safe."

"What about the magical ones?" Luella asked. Deanna grinned and glanced at her mother, busy ordering what looked suspiciously like beer.

"Nearest thing to one in this pub is getting the drinks in right now. We'll be fine."

Fortunately for Luella's state of mind, the drinks turned out to be perfectly non-alcoholic banana smoothies, albeit served in beer tankards. Deanna raised an eyebrow as her mother brought them over.

"Smoothies? In a tankard? New one on me, mum."

"Now, now, Deanna. You mustn't blame the barman; muggle drinks aren't exactly his forte after all," said Caitlin as she took a seat and began to sip her drink. "Still, they taste alright. We'll turn this place into Cafe Rouge yet. So Luella. Want to show us that parcel you got this morning?"

Luella reached for her bag with a start. She'd forgotten about the parcel. It had arrived by owl post about five minutes before they'd been due to leave. She'd not had time to look at it properly, yet had been too curious to abandon it, so she'd brought it with her. And now both Tylers were looking at her expectantly.

Ripping open the brown paper, she opened the box within to reveal a small, leather-bound tome with gold leaf edging. Deanna leaned over her shoulder and read the title out loud.

"Hogwarts: A Prospectus," she read. "Cool, they sent you a prospectus!" She turned to her mother, mildly outraged. "How come they didn't send me a prospectus? I want a prospectus!"

"Deanna, you're mage-raised, you don't need one," Caitlin sighed. "I'm sure Luella'll let you borrow hers."

Luella was not slow to take the hint. Flipping open the book, she started to show it to Deanna. And promptly dropped it with a shriek, causing half the pub to look at her, before glancing away muttering things like "Kids" and "Ruddy Muggle borns". "The pictures! They're.... they're *moving*!"

Deanna couldn't help sniggering, and even Caitlin couldn't resist smiling. "Course they are," Deanna grinned. "All magical photographs do that. Get used to it, kiddo."

"So what's in there anyway?" Caitlin asked idly. "I can't say I've ever seen a copy, they certainly never had them in my day."

"Not much," said Luella, scanning the contents. "Brief history. Welcome bits. Description of subjects and houses. Stuff on extra-curricular activities. Oh, and an introduction to the teachers."

"Really?" asked Caitlin, reaching out for it. "Let's have a look, I want to find out if I know any of them. I only really know the Headmaster." She turned to the appropriate page, revealing a picture of an elderly smiling wizard looking for all the world like Merlin in Luella's *Stories of King Arthur* book.

"And there he is," Caitlin smiled. "Professor Albus Dumbledore. A highly likeable man. Good to his students. You can trust him, and if you ever have a problem, he'll be able to help you. Remember his name, Luella. He was one of the shining lights of our kind during the War."

"The war?" Luella asked. Somehow, she did not think Caitlin meant World War Two. "What war is that then?"

"A war you're lucky to have missed," said Caitlin, suddenly appearing very grim indeed; although moments later, she was all smiles again. "Who else have we got here, ah yes. Professor Minerva McGonagall. Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House, Professor of Transfiguration, Registered Animaga. Watch out for her, she's very strict. Stay on the right side of her though, and you will be fine. She's not needlessly cruel."

Luella did not feel very relieved. Professor McGonagall was looking very sternly at her for some reason.

"Professor Delphinia Sprout, Head of Hufflepuff House, Professor of Herbology." Professor Sprout looked nicer, in a round, maternal way. "She's nice, very patient, especially with first years. Just don't damage any of the plants. Then there's Professor George Flitwick, Professor of Charms, Head of Ravenclaw House. Is he still teaching? Good lord. A bit excitable, but a good teacher nonetheless." Professor Flitwick was waving at them from the photo, which combined with his small stature, made him look for all the world like a prematurely aged schoolboy.

"Now to find out who's Head of Slytherin. They appointed a new one in the early eighties, but I never did find out who it was." Caitlin turned the page, eyes alive with curiosity. Deanna whispered in Luella's ear,

"Mum used to be in Slytherin, that's why she wants to know."

Caitlin looked down at the Head of Slytherin and froze, eyes widening in what surely couldn't be fear? Feeling slightly worried herself, Luella looked to see what had thrown her. Scowling back at them was a very pale man with dark greasy hair and a slightly hooked nose, dressed in deep black robes. But the most noticeable feature of all was his deathly black eyes. Cold, they were, and full of anger. His expression said quite clearly "You'd better be pretty damn good to impress me." Luella gave an involuntary shudder. Deanna, alone of the three, was not frightened.

"Oh good. My likely future House Head is Satan. Wonderful. Mum, who is he anyway, and why do we have to have the dictator?" Deanna pouted.

Somehow, Caitlin managed to snap herself out of it. "His name, Deanna, is Severus Snape," she said softly, her eyes blazing. "I don't know why Dumbledore hired him, but I suspect there's more to it than meets the eye. There usually is where he's concerned." She slammed the book shut just a little too vehemently, as if glad to get rid of those haunting dark eyes. Haunting... and haunted.

"He just looked frightened to me," Luella whispered. "Like he's on the run from something and doesn't want it to catch up with him."

"So he damn well should," Caitlin hissed, furious. She pushed the book roughly back to Luella. "Put it away, child. I've seen enough."

Exchanging glances with Deanna, Luella did as she was asked. Not daring to ask the inevitable question herself, she indicated for Deanna to do it. She was not slow in obliging.

"So, er, Mum. What did he do to get up your nose, then?"

Caitlin just turned away and laughed.

"Deanna, let's just say he and I have unfinished business and leave it at that, shall we? We went to school together then lost contact," Caitlin said by way of explanation, the look on her face indicating that this topic was very definitely closed.

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Luella soon had other things to think about, and the conversation regarding Professor Snape found itself pushed to the back of her mind as they finished their drinks and left the pub by the back door. Here they found themselves in a small courtyard, empty except for a few bins.

"Is this it?" Luella asked, frowning. "Doesn't look like much to me."

"Patience, Luella," Caitlin smiled, producing her wand. "Many things in this world are not what they seem at first. Something you'll learn soon enough. Now watch carefully. You too, Deanna," she added sharply, seeing her daughter's attention wander. "You'll need to know how to do this yourselves eventually. This is how you get into Diagon Alley. Third brick up, second from the left. Tap it three times with your wand and say *Alohomora!*"

The wall shimmered and faded, leaving a stone archway behind, leading into a narrow winding street which could only be Diagon Alley. Luella gazed at it in awe.

"Wow," she whispered.

"Wow indeed," Caitlin smiled. "This, children, is Diagon Alley."

First stop was the magic bank, Gringotts. Luella handed over the money her parents had given her and had them converted into magic currency, Galleons, Sickles and Knuts. Then she had to endure the cart ride into the bowels of Gringotts to the Tylers' vault, where Caitlin filled her moneybags from the dazzling array of coins stacked up there. Clearly she had not been exaggerating when she said she came from an old magical family, Luella thought.

Next was a trip to Madam Malkin's robe shop. Here, they were in for a surprise. An imposing looking witch in her mid thirties was watching a young witch looking in the window. From the pale blonde hair and skin, and the small, delicately pointed features they shared, it was clear that they were mother and daughter.

It was also clear that they were no strangers to the Tylers. Caitlin's eyes narrowed as she strode forward, while Deanna gritted her teeth, clearly not wanting anything to do with either of them.

"Who are they?" Luella asked, wondering what on earth they'd done to upset her.

"My godmother and her daughter," Deanna muttered. "Auntie Mel's OK, if a little distant. But her daughter's a nightmare. Right little stuck up cow."

Caitlin had slowed her pace and was now creeping stealthily up behind the older woman, as if to surprise her. She almost made it too, but as she drew her wand, her target whirled round, grabbed her by the wrist and spun her round into an armlock. The two women locked eyes, before dissolving into laughter, as Caitlin found herself released.

"Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin," the other witch chided her with a smile. "You'll have to do a lot better than that to surprise me."

"Damn, and I thought I'd done so well too," Caitlin pouted. "I used Glamoury too."

"You did," nodded the other woman. "On yourself. But not on Deanna, I'm afraid. Soon as I saw her reflection in the glass, I knew you wouldn't be far away."

"Dammit," Caitlin swore. "Never mind. Next time, Mel Lovegood. Next time." She noticed Luella staring at her as if she'd gone mad. "Don't look so worried, Luella! Standard Auror greeting, nothing to worry about." She turned back to her friend. "Melissa, this is Luella Martin, a friend of my daughter's. She's starting Hogwarts this year. Luella, this is Melissa Lovegood, Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication, our police force. And an old friend of mine."

"Hello," Luella said nervously.

Melissa Lovegood just smiled. "Hello there. Enjoying the magical world so far?"

Luella nodded. "It's cool," she replied.

"Sounds like something my daughter would say," Melissa remarked. "Speaking of which..." She turned to her daughter, who was still staring at a black sparkly formal dress in the window of Madam Malkin's. "Marlie, you're far too young for it."

"Ohhh," sulked Marlie, turning away. "Mum, that's so unfair. Bet Dad'd let me have it."

"He would not," Melissa told her. "Not until you're older anyway. Marlie, this is Luella Martin. She's going to be a schoolmate of yours. Luella, my daughter Marlie."

Marlie looked Luella up and down. Seeming to approve of what she saw, she responded with a smile. Not a very big smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Hello there," she drawled, holding out a hand. "Marlie Lovegood. Pleased to meet you."

Luella took her hand, still uncertain. There was something about Marlie, something that wasn't quite right. Something... false. A stuck-up cow, Deanna had called her. Luella had the feeling that that wasn't the half of it.

"Pleased to meet you too," she smiled back, hoping that Marlie didn't pick up on insincerity as well as she did.

"Muggle-born, I take it," Marlie said, eyeing Luella's outfit, which consisted of denim shorts, trainers and a green Benetton t-shirt.

"Um, yeah," Luella replied, suddenly feeling embarrassed without knowing why. After all, Marlie herself was wearing flared jeans, blue and white canvas plimsolls, imitation Ray-Bans, and a sleeveless top with 'Sagittarian Kitten' written on it, next to a picture of a kitten with a bow and arrow, while her mother was wearing a sleeveless plain white top, smart black trousers and a matching jacket slung over her shoulder. Neither would look out of place in any high street in the country.

"That's OK," Marlie replied breezily. "My dad's a Muggle too. Works with aircraft. He's very talented."

"Mine's an accountant," Luella said, still feeling as if she was admitting all her family were criminals.

"Someone has to be," sighed Marlie. She turned and noticed Deanna for the first time. "Oh. You're here."

"You think my mother would take my best mate and not me?" Deanna bristled. "Get real, Lovegood." She was glaring at Marlie with all the ferocity she could muster. Marlie for her part was doing a good job of looking down on her for someone who was shorter.

"Comparing the two of you, I can't say I wouldn't," Marlie murmured, lowering her voice so the adults didn't hear her. However, she was all innocence and smiles as her mother called her name.

"Marlie, dear, Caitlin and I are going to get your schoolbooks, so we'll leave you three here to get measured for your robes. That alright with you?"

"Perfectly, Mum," Marlie beamed, although Luella could tell by her eyes that it was anything but perfect. Deanna for her part was silently imploring her mother not to be left alone with her.

"We won't be long," Caitlin promised, guessing what was on her daughter's mind. "I need to have a word with your Auntie Mel, that's all. We'll be right back."

Deanna groaned but did not complain. Money and book lists changed hands and the two grown-ups departed, leaving three children, two of whom were staring murderously at each other.

"Well," Marlie said coldly, "shall we go in?"

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"Was that a good idea?" Melissa asked as Caitlin led her away. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to leave our two alone for any longer than necessary - I saw the way they were looking at each other - hey!"

Caitlin had grabbed her by the arm and hauled her in to a side alley.

"Severus Snape is Head of Slytherin now. Did you know?"

"Caitlin, I -"

"Did you know?" Caitlin hissed, thrusting her against a wall. "Did you? Hmm?"

Anyone else would have been worried. However, when you dealt with the Dark Arts every day, one annoyed Auror wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

"Caitlin," Melissa said softly. "Put... me... down!" She grabbed Caitlin by the wrist and detached her in one flowing move, sending her staggering back.

Caitlin eyed her friend warily, clutching her wrist. "Ow."

"Don't threaten me again, Caitlin," said Melissa, not taking her eyes off the other woman. "Yes, I knew. Because of his past, Dumbledore had to clear it with Crouch first - they wanted me as a character reference."

"And you were going to tell me about this when?" Caitlin fumed. "Before or after Deanna graduated?"

"I was going to, but you said you didn't want to hear his name mentioned," said Melissa. "Every time the syllable 'Sev-' passed my lips, you blocked your ears and refused to listen."

That had her. Caitlin couldn't deny that this was true.

"That's not the point," she muttered. "You should have written it down or something. You should have told me, Mel."

"And what would you have done if I had?" Melissa said tenderly, her attitude softening. "Where else would she have gone? She doesn't speak a word of French, so Beauxbatons is out of the question. You've said yourself you'd never send any child of yours to Durmstrang, and would you really want her going to America? It's a long way, Caitlin. And you can't exactly home-school her, can you?"

"Suppose," Caitlin sighed. "Gods, Mel!" She buried her head in her hands. "What am I going to do? You know what he's like, he'll guess as soon as he lays eyes on her! And a look at the school records will confirm it. Suppose he tells her? Suppose he gives it away accidentally? Suppose he gets in touch with me again? I don't think I could bear it, Mel, I really couldn't!" Caitlin was near tears by this stage.

Melissa put her arms around her, trying to comfort her friend. "Caitlin. Caitlin, ssh. Don't cry. Look at me." She lifted her friend's chin with a single finger, so Caitlin found herself looking straight into Melissa's eyes.

"Cait, you're gonna be alright," Melissa said gently. "If you do meet him again, you'll cope. Because you're strong. Stronger than you know, and a lot stronger than Severus. Mainly because you know. He doesn't even suspect. He may well guess. But if he does, you'll have me for support. And I will do my level best to make sure that he does nothing that would upset you or Deanna."

"Thanks, Mel," Caitlin whispered, before breaking out into a smile. "Come on, we'd better get back to the shopping, get as much as we can done before our daughters kill each other."

"Suppose we'd best," smiled Melissa, linking arms with Caitlin. "Although if Marlie killed Deanna, it would solve the Severus problem... Kidding!" she laughed as Caitlin glared at her, before hauling her friend off in the direction of the nearest cauldron shop.

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Meanwhile, back in Madam Malkin's, the three girls were up on stools being measured. Marlie and Deanna were doing a superb job of ignoring each other, backs turned, arms folded when they could get away with it, room temperature plummeting. While Luella, stuck helplessly in the middle, was desperately trying to make conversation.

"So, you two already know each other, do you?" Luella asked. "How'd you meet?"

"We got stuck with her whenever her mum couldn't find a babysitter," Marlie snapped.

"Mum used to leave me there when she had to work nights," Deanna said, pointedly ignoring Marlie. "Quite a nice house, really. Shame about the daughter though."

Marlie appeared to be seething under her breath, but to her credit, did not react. However, that was only because her robes were currently full of pins. Luella had the feeling that as soon as those robes were off, there'd be a fight, and there were an awful lot of sharp implements around. In a vain bid to break the tension, she decided to ask about Hogwarts. Good thing she'd had the chance to look at the prospectus earlier, really.

"So, Marlie, what do you know about how we end up in houses? The prospectus says it's based on personal qualities."

Marlie seemed to calm down at this, shaking her hair back with a purr, and launching into a lecture. This was obviously a subject she knew something about.

"Well, there's four houses, named after the four mages who founded Hogwarts. They're called Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin. The founders used to choose students for their classes based on the qualities they prized most highly, and that turned into the present house system. Gryffindor preferred the reckless fools, Ravenclaw the nerds, Hufflepuff the dull, boring worthy types and Slytherin the talented, interesting people."

Deanna snorted. "No prizes for guessing where your biases lie."

Marlie looked slightly insulted. "There is nothing wrong with having a preference for which house you want to be in. Mum's told me about all the houses, and I think Slytherin's the best. Anyway, I believe your mother was also in Slytherin."

Deanna didn't reply, she just scowled. Luella could only roll her eyebrows. Never mind Marlie and Deanna fighting, she might be slapping Deanna herself in a minute. Only the other day, Deanna had been talking about Slytherin House and how much she wanted to be part of it. Still, if she could defuse things, she would.

"So why do you like Slytherin then? What's so good about it? Forgive me, but I'm Muggle-born and don't know these things," Luella smiled, desperately trying to warm the atmosphere up.

Marlie immediately launched into her sales pitch. "Well, my mum was one, and my brother Mike, he's one too. They're really good, they've won the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup for the past five years running. That's mostly why I want in, they're the best at Quidditch and I've always wanted to be a professional Seeker."

"Quidditch? Seeker?" Luella looked confused.

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know, would you?" Marlie smiled, her manner slightly deprecating, but nonetheless not unfriendly. "Quidditch is the sport in the magical world. We play it on broomsticks, two teams of seven each. There's three hoops at each end, fifty feet off the ground. The idea is for each team to get the main ball, called the Quaffle, through the other team's hoops. You get ten points each time you score. That's the job of the Chasers. Each team has three. Each team also has a Keeper, who flies in front of their hoops and has to stop the Quaffle from going through them."

Luella, somewhat confused, attempted to process what she'd just heard. "OK, so there's three Chasers, trying to get the Quaffle through the other team's goal hoops, and the other side's Keeper trying to stop them. Simple enough. OK, so that's four. What do the other three on each team do?"

"Well, two of them are called Beaters. They fly around with bats in their hand. It's their job to protect their team from these other two balls flying around. They're called Bludgers, and they fly around trying to knock players off their brooms. The Beaters have to knock the Bludgers away from their team and towards the opposition."

Luella looked thoroughly confused now. "So there's also two balls called Bludgers flying around and the Beaters have to keep them away from their side?"

Marlie nodded. "That's right. Then you have the most important player of all, the Seeker. That's the position I want to play in."

"And what does the Seeker do?"

"Well, the Seeker has to look for ball number four, the Golden Snitch. It's a small, golden, winged ball that flies around very fast. The Seeker has to keep an eye out for it and catch it. Capturing the Snitch earns your team 150 points. It also means the end of the game, so whoever catches the Snitch usually wins the game for their team. Seekers are usually small and light, so I'd be well suited physically."

Deanna gave another snort, but didn't say anything. Luella looked at her meaningfully.

By this time, Madam Malkin had finished with them, and their robes were ready. They collected and paid for them, and headed off to Flourish and Blott's. Luella allowed Marlie to go ahead so she could talk to Deanna.

"Well? Is this going to go on every time we meet?"

"Probably," Deanna shrugged.

Luella sighed. "Deanna, she's going to school with us. We have seven years with her. They're not going to be any fun if you keep winding her up!"

Deanna stopped in her tracks.

"Look, Lu, you saw what she was like! She's a little snob who looks down on everyone. A spoilt little brat who thinks the world revolves around her!" Deanna looked at Luella, appealing to her better judgement. "Come on, she was looking down on you too."

Luella had to admit that she had felt a little inferior.

"But that doesn't mean we shouldn't give her the benefit of the doubt. She might be nice deep down!"

"Very deep down," said Deanna. "Flamin' hell, Lu, you're too nice for your own good, you know that?"

"Well, you know, it beats being a git," Luella grinned. She noticed that Marlie had already found her mother, and that Deanna's mother was standing next to her, calling for them both to hurry up. Taking Deanna's arm, she led her over.

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Melissa and Caitlin were waiting outside with three bulging Flourish and Blott's bags between them. They'd also bought some basic Potions equipment for their charges, which was packed tightly into three large Apothecary bags.

"Ready?" Caitlin asked. "We thought we'd get your animals next, then go to Ollivander's for your wands. We've got your books and other equipment. If you'd like to carry these, while we have the books..." Bags were exchanged, and the party of five moved off towards the Magical Menagerie.

Inside was a bewildering variety of creatures. Quite aside from the usual selection of owls, cats, toads, and rats, there were lizards, fish, bizarre looking tropical birds, tortoises and some very strange creatures with two heads Luella had never seen before. Before she could ask what they were, she found herself steered round to a section marked "Hogwarts Animals".

"Here we are," Melissa announced. "You can choose a cat, toad, or owl. Marlie, come with me, tell me what you'd like."

Deanna and Luella gathered round to have a look, as Marlie was drawn away by her mother. Caitlin stood behind to give advice.

"Don't bother with the toads, they've not been in fashion for years. All they seem to do is get lost. Owls are great companions and very useful for delivering letters, although Hogwarts has its own owls for students' use. However, if you want special magical powers get yourselves cats. They're far more intuitive."

Deanna gazed at the owls. "Nice. I like that barn owl over there. It's cute."

Luella let the conversation drift over her as she looked at the cats. One in particular caught her eye. A black cat with a thin ring of silver fur round its neck looked back at her. Luella opened the cage and picked it up. "Hello, you. Fancy being a witch's cat?" she murmured to it. The cat purred and nuzzled her. The witch behind the counter called over to her.

"Are you thinking of buying that cat?"

Luella carried the cat over. "What's it called?"

"Her name's Sootica. Yours for four Galleons."

Luella looked at her. "Sootica. Sooty cat. Sooty. Sooty cat-Sootica." She tickled her under the chin. Sootica purred and slow-blinked. "I'll take her." The money was handed over, and Sootica installed securely in a cat-basket. Luella went to find Deanna, and saw her stroking a small brown and white owl nestling on her shoulder.

Deanna smiled. "Meet Spooky. Gorgeous, isn't he?"

Luella had to admit he was lovely. She was joined by Marlie, who was cradling a white fluffy cat with green eyes.

"Is that your owl then, Tyler? He's rather cute. Bit small though," she sneered.

"He'll do," Deanna said coldly. "At least I won't be hving to borrow owls whenever I want to write home."

Luella swiftly decided that now would be a good time to change the subject. If Madam Malkin's had not been a good venue for a fight, a shop full of possibly dangerous animals with teeth and claws was even less ideal.

"Who's the cat?" Luella asked.

"This?" Marlie asked. "He's called Snow Emperor. Snowy." Snowy purred.

Deanna couldn't resist sneering at this. "Snow Emperor? Who the hell picked that name?"

Marlie glared back. "A cat of breeding deserves a name that reflects that." She turned back to her cat, tickling him under the chin. "I think Snowy suits him fine. Doesn't it, Snowy-kins?"

Deanna rolled her eyes. "Come on, let's pay for these and find Mum. What's yours, Lu?"

"Sootica. Sooty."

"Sweet. Proper witch's cat, anyway. Good name. I like her."

Deanna followed Marlie to the counter to pay for Spooky as Caitlin approached them.

"All set?"

"Just about. Deanna's getting an owl. I've got Sooty here. Marlie's got some white fluffball."

Caitlin bent down to look at Sooty. "Ahh, she's sweet. You've got yourself a proper cat there. She's smart. Ah, Deanna, you're ready." She straightened up as Deanna approached with Spooky in a cage. "Time to move on. Enough of the fripperies, it's now time for your most important bit of kit." She gazed out of the window at Ollivander's Wand Emporium. "Time to get your wands."

Ollivander's was a small place from the outside, but once inside, the piles of boxes stacked up all around made it look bigger. Mr. Ollivander, a small thin man, looked up as they walked in.

"Welcome, dear ladies. Melissa Harker, now Lovegood, and Caitlin Tyler. I remember your wands as though it were yesterday. Yours, Ms. Tyler, was apple with a unicorn hair. Nine inches, flexible. Good for charm work. And yours, Mrs. Lovegood, was oak with a dragon's heart string. Exceptionally good for duelling and all anti-dark work. Seven inches, durable. And these must be your daughters. Off to Hogwarts, I see."

Luella and Deanna were both a little afraid of him and hung back. Even Marlie, normally so extrovert and self-styled expert on the magical world, seemed a little nervous.

Melissa turned to the three girls. "Well? Marlie?"

Marlie stepped forward nervously. Mr. Ollivander measured her, looked thoughtful, and disappeared into the back room, returning with an armful of boxes. Marlie waved each one in turn, but nothing happened. Mr. Ollivander, unworried, fetched some more for her. Marlie, becoming increasingly anxious, waved them all, until, to her relief, one emitted a shower of pale blue sparks, which turned into a transparent white owl. The owl looked around, hooted softly and flew off, before vanishing into thin air. Marlie clasped her wand, and gasped in delight.

Mr. Ollivander looked pleased. "Seven inches, whippy, willow with a unicorn tail hair. Pussy willow, to be precise. Excellent for transfiguration. Six Galleons, please."

Melissa paid, seemingly quite pleased with her daughter. Mr. Ollivander turned to Caitlin.

"And can I be of assistance to you, Ms. Tyler?"

Caitlin smiled, all charm. "I'm wanting wands for my daughter Deanna and her friend Luella Martin, if you would be so kind. Deanna?"

Deanna stepped forward, doing her best to hide her anxiety. It was almost working too. Mr. Ollivander measured her without a word and went to find wands for her to try. It did not seem to take long this time. On around the fifth wand, Deanna succeeded in causing a jet of red and white fire to shoot out of it, singeing Mr. Ollivander's eyebrows.

"Nine inches, sturdy, ash, tail of a phoenix. Another wand good for an Auror-in-waiting. You will do well with that one, Miss Tyler. And now for you, Miss Martin."

Luella stepped forward, gulping. Here was her first attempt at real magic. Proof of whether she was a witch or not. She couldn't help feeling a little nervous. After all, both Marlie and Deanna had witch mothers. Of course they could do magic. She was

just an accountant's daughter from Surrey. What if she tried every wand in the shop and nothing happened? Would Mr. Ollivander declare that there must have been some kind of mistake and she wasn't really a witch at all? The prospect of ending up back at a local high school while Deanna was off turning people into frogs did not appeal.

Apprehensive, she waited while Mr. Ollivander measured her and brought some wands for her to try. Trembling, she took the first wand offered her ("ten inches, flexible, elm") and waved it. Nothing. She tried another. Again nothing. This went on for what seemed like hours. Luella began to panic. She was right, she wasn't really a witch at all, none of these wands would work for her. It was then that Mr. Ollivander handed her one that felt just that little bit different from the rest. It felt warmer, more powerful to the touch. Luella felt a wave of energy go rushing up her spine as she held it up. A feeling of utter confidence took possession of her, and almost dismissively, she waved it.

A silver snake with green eyes, not illusion like Marlie's owl, but very, very real, leapt out of the end of the wand and reared up, hissing violently, announcing its power to the world before levitating into the air, grasping its tail between its teeth and spinning until it seemed to be a plain silver circle suspended in midair. All the light seemed to vanish out of the rest of the shop as the snake took on a luminescent shine of its own. Luella watched, transfixed, as the rest of the world seemed to die away, leaving nothing but her and the snake.

Until the snake sped up to an impossible speed, then exploded into a shower of green sparks which formed a design bearing a vague resemblance to a DNA helix before disappearing into nothingness. Luella felt the power fade, the adrenaline crash, and the hairs on the back of her neck settle down, as she blinked and watched the world return. She was still trembling, but was no longer in any doubt about her witch status. In fact, she was now rather afraid of the power. She turned to look at the others, wondering what on earth they were thinking about it all. Deanna and Marlie were both staring at her open-mouthed.

"What was that, Lu?" Deanna whispered.

"Don't know, but it was pretty cool!" Marlie gasped. "Do it again!"

Mr. Ollivander, however, looked as if he was about to have a heart attack. "Twelve inches, swishy, hazel. Contains dragon heartstring," he managed to stammer, before staring at Luella. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Luella felt her mouth go dry, having no idea how to answer that one. Helpless, she turned to Caitlin.

The two Aurors exchanged glances.

"Go on, Cait," said Melissa. "Do it, and let's go. Less said about this the better."

Caitlin nodded, and approached Mr. Ollivander with a smile.

"Forget," she said, an aura of power surrounding her. "Forget, and remember only that you sold three wands to Melissa and me. Three perfectly ordinary wands, for three perfectly ordinary children." She took out a money bag. "Take twenty five Galleons for the wands, and be happy." Leaving the money on the counter, she turned and ushered the two girls out of the shop. Melissa was already herding Marlie out into the street.

"Mum, what was all that about?" Marlie was asking loudly. "What's up with Luella, and why all the secrecy and messing about with memories?"

"Keep your voice down, child!" Melissa was heard hissing. "Not another word until we get home. Now, we're going to meet your brother, and you're going to act as if everything was normal and nothing untoward happened. Alright?"

Marlie muttered in protest, but she did keep quiet as her mother hustled her away. Deanna turned to her own mother as soon as the Lovegoods had gone.

"Mum, what was that about? No one produces magic like that when they've only just got their wand!" She was looking at Luella rather oddly, and Luella didn't like it one bit.

"What's happening?" she asked, gazing up at Caitlin with terrified eyes. "Why is everyone so freaked? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing," Caitlin soothed her, although Luella could see the worry in her eyes. "Don't be afraid, Luella, everything'll be alright. But this does change things." Caitlin stared into space, an almost haunted look on her face. "Yes, this changes everything."

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Chapter Three Slytherin Secrets

The journey home was a distinctly tense affair. Caitlin was in no mood to talk, snapping at them for the littlest things, so both Deanna and Luella said very little. Luella felt sick inside. What had she done? Why had that snake appeared? There was no doubt that it was the Slytherin house emblem, but if that was all it was, why had the Aurors reacted the way they had? Why the need to erase Mr. Ollivander's memory? And why had Melissa Lovegood told her own daughter to keep quiet, mention this to no one and act as if everything was normal? Caitlin had told her not to worry, but Luella had a feeling that she hadn't been entirely truthful. Deanna was now shooting some rather strange glances in her direction. It was difficult to tell if she was afraid of her or merely very impressed.

The atmosphere was still tense as they arrived back at the Tylers' bungalow. Luella wasn't sure about accepting Caitlin's offer of tea, but on the other hand, who else could she talk to about what happened?

Deanna was on her mother's case as soon as they were all inside.

"Mum, what happened?" she demanded. "And don't tell me that it was nothing to worry about! I saw the way you and Auntie Mel reacted! You only act like that when you're working! What's up with Lu, and why all the secrecy?" She had the look of one not to be put off by idle excuses.

"Let me get a foot in the door, why don't you?" her mother snapped, clearly rattled. "Listen, why don't you go and put the kettle on, then we can gather in the kitchen, have some tea, and I'll tell you everything you need to know. OK?"

"Heard that one before," Deanna muttered. However, she did do as she was told.

Luella turned to Caitlin, not reassured by any of this. "Mrs. Tyler, what's really going on? What's wrong with me?" she begged, desperate for an answer.

"Nothing's wrong with you," Caitlin reassured her, and Luella had the feeling that in this at least, she was telling the truth. "As a witch, you've nothing to complain about. You're not inferior." She looked at Luella again, staring at her almost in awe. "But you might wish you were at times. Come on, let's go and sit down. I'll tell you everything." She led Luella into the kitchen.

Deanna was waiting for them, preparing three mugs of tea.

"Do you take sugar in yours, Lu?"

"Um, yeah," said Luella, momentarily distracted. "Just one, thanks."

"One spoonful or two for you, Mum?"

"Two," said Caitlin firmly. She reconsidered for a moment. "Actually, make it three."

Deanna raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, adding the extra sugar. Soon the tea was ready and they were seated around the kitchen table with a mug each.

"So Mum," said Deanna softly. "You gonna tell us what's up with Lu?"

Caitlin nodded, taking a sip of her drink. She was drinking out of a green mug with the Slytherin coat of arms on one side, and a pair of crossed broomsticks on the other, with a scroll underneath reading 'Hogwarts Quidditch Cup Winner, 1972-73'. Luella realised she'd seen it before but had never really noticed the now obvious magical references. Maybe it was because she now knew she was a witch, and could see these things.

"First of all," Caitlin began, "I want you both to promise me that you will not reveal what I am about to tell you to anyone. That, Luella, includes your parents. They're Muggles, they wouldn't understand, it's probably best they don't know. Is that clear?"

Luella and Deanna both nodded.

"Good," said Caitlin approvingly. "Because not all of what I am about to tell you is common knowledge. Much of it is frightening, and not a little is actually dangerous. Especially for you, Luella."

"Oh god," Luella whispered, clutching on to her own mug, a Thundercats mug that Deanna was very attached to.

"If it's so dangerous, why are you telling us?" Deanna asked, rather pointedly. "I'm not so curious that I'd want to put Lu's life in danger!"

"Because you've already seen too much, and not knowing would put you both in far more danger than knowing the truth!" Caitlin retorted sharply. She lowered her voice as Deanna flinched back, clearly affected by her mother's words. "Listen, I'm sorry if I sound harsh. But this is important, and your lives could be on the line here. So try not to take any of this personally - I don't mean to hurt you. It's just that it won't do either of you any long-term favours if I hold back out of politeness. As you can see from the mug," she showed it to them both with a smile, "I'm a former member of Slytherin House. And a highly successful Quidditch Chaser too, but that's neither here nor there," she added. "Deanna, you too could well end up there. And as for you, Luella..." She fixed Luella with a probing stare. "I think you may well find yourself there too. Which means there are things about it you'll need to know." She paused for breath and launched into a monologue.

"Over the years, all four houses have produced powerful individuals. Some good, some bad. However, Slytherin has produced more than its fair share of dark mages over the years. Salazar Slytherin himself was rumoured to practice the Dark Arts. He is known to have opposed the acceptance of Muggle or part-Muggle children at Hogwarts, giving rise to a lot of prejudice on the part of certain pure-blood families. Some of them have a very low view of Muggle-borns. Sorry, Luella, but you need to be aware of this," she said apologetically as Luella's eyes flared in anger.

"There's nothing wrong with having Muggle parents!" Luella snapped.

"Yes, well, you know that and I know that," said Caitlin gently. "My father was a Muggle too, although he died when I was quite young. But there are others who don't, and you may find yourself with a bit to prove. I hasten to add though that they're in the minority. Even in Slytherin."

Luella subsided, although a spark of anger still remained. Marlie Lovegood's subtle sense of superiority was at least partially explained - one mage parent was obviously better than none at all.

"And this git was your House Founder," Luella said softly. The prospectus hadn't mentioned that, funnily enough.

Caitlin looked deep in thought, as if she'd been expecting that particular response. When she did speak, it was slowly. "He's still our Founder, Luella. Whether you agree with him or not, you'll have to come to terms with that somehow. Now, I personally think you have to view Salazar's ideas in the context of the times," she said by way of explanation. "He lived during a time when Muggles were very hostile to the idea of magic and we had to keep a low profile. I think he saw Muggle children as a threat to security. Either that, or he'd seen too many close friends die after being lynched by Muggles to ever really trust them. Also, you haven't seen the way they lived at the time. I suppose they teach you in your history lessons about how people lived in the Middle Ages?"

Luella and Deanna both nodded, grimacing.

"It sounded pretty revolting," said Luella. "All those nasty diseases, and no decent toilets."

"Precisely," Caitlin smiled thinly. "And if it sounds horrible to you, think how a mage coming from a community where you had magical privies that made the waste disappear, mud resistant robes, cures for most diseases known to the Muggles, a non-existent infant mortality rate, nice clean stone buildings for everyone, house elves that kept everything sanitary using magic and a standard of living not far off what you're both used to, would think. I'm telling you, the phrase 'filthy Muggles' wasn't abuse back then, it was a fact. Of course the mages of the day felt they were superior - why wouldn't they? The poorest mage lived better than a Muggle king. Salazar was only different in that his attitudes were more extreme and professed more openly. He wasn't interested in saving Muggles from themselves, and he certainly didn't want their children around, with their insistence in only one god, and eternal damnation for those who didn't follow him, and that magic users not sanctioned by their High Priest in Rome were going straight to Hell. Actually can't say I entirely blame him on that score," she said with a grin.

Luella had to admit that being told that your magic was evil on a daily basis would probably annoy even the most patient of mages.

"But that doesn't mean being a Muggle-born makes you inferior!" she responded.

"Well, of course not," Caitlin replied. "Times have changed, and so have Muggles. Most love the idea of magic. That weird Middle Eastern crucifixion cult has lost its

hold on their minds. And perhaps most importantly, they've discovered science, and it's given them power equal to ours in a way. No, Luella, in no way do I think Muggles are inferior. But back then, Salazar had some good points, and a lot of mages agreed with him, up until the point where he started secretly advocating the extermination of Muggle-borns, and the banning of mage-Muggle marriages, or at least severely restricting them to suitable candidates. That was when he crossed the line, and that's when war broke out, and Salazar got thrown out of Hogwarts. Battles were fought, alliances were made and broken, and a particularly nasty bloodfeud ensued that endures to this day. Salazar, I might add, lost, although his House stayed. Enough of them repented or stayed loyal to make it worthwhile keeping it. After all, Salazar Slytherin was still a Founder. But from then on, Slytherin House was seen as different, marked out by its past. At best, a house to be wary of, at worst the source of everything evil. Dark mages from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are overlooked or explained away as having had a traumatic past. Dark Slytherins have always been blown up into terrifying figures of absolute evil. Their Dark Mages are seen as one-offs, aberrations. Ours are seen as typical Slytherins. Until the 1970's, we Slytherins have always put up with the prejudice and just got on with our lives. We dealt with it by consoling ourselves that our house may be evil but at least we were the talented ones. That's why we're noted for our ambition: we start out automatically disadvantaged and work twice as hard to catch up. We've all got something to prove. We've been hated but we get by. All that changed when Voldemort emerged onto the scene. Not many people know this, but he was a Slytherin at school."

Deanna's jaw dropped. "Voldemort went to Hogwarts??"

"Who's Voldemort?" asked Luella. The name meant nothing to her.

"Of course he did, where else would he have gone?" Caitlin said impatiently. "And don't say Durmstrang."

"It's a magical school up near the Arctic," Deanna informed her. "Mum reckons it teaches people the Dark Arts."

"It does teach them, Deanna, Albus Dumbledore himself confirmed it to me," said Caitlin, clearly not happy. "Likely to create a lot of work for us in the future. After all, Dark mages don't just turn up from nowhere, they need educating too. But that's beside the point. To answer your question, Luella, Lord Voldemort, as he liked to call himself - it wasn't his real name - was the most evil wizard these isles have ever known. He didn't just study the Dark Arts, he used them. He was after nothing less than world domination, and he was prepared to use any means to get it. For eleven years, he held magical society in his grip, he and his followers hunting and killing any who opposed them, and occasionally just doing it for fun. He was pure evil." She paused, the memories clearly causing her pain. "I faced him twice, and barely escaped with my life each time. Both times, it was by sheer luck that I survived. Just as it was sheer luck that eventually brought him down." She stopped speaking, staring into the distance, eyes glistening. Luella sat next her, digesting all this. This must have been the war that she was lucky to have missed. Now she could see what Caitlin meant. She looked at the witch with new respect. All these years she'd simply seen her as Deanna's mother, who in her working life happened to be known as Detective Inspector Tyler, plain clothes policewoman. And now it turned out she'd faced the

most dangerous wizard ever, not once but twice, and survived. Luella was most impressed. One thing was certain, she'd never take Caitlin Tyler for granted ever again.

Caitlin seemed to recover herself, and was continuing.

"Anyway, Voldemort was a Slytherin, and although it wasn't widely known for sure, most suspected. He also drew most of his followers from Slytherin House, although by no means all. However, it was enough for most mages to have their worst suspicions about us proved. Also, for the first time in our long history, Slytherins themselves began to believe that they were intrinsically evil. I've had friends killed by Voldemort and his followers, but I've also seen people I thought were friends go over to his side and do the most awful things. And that is something that all the Slytherins who didn't support him have had to live with ever since. We, more than most, have had to face what our house is capable of."

Deanna clearly was having trouble believing all this. "Slytherin the evil house... Voldemort one of you... His followers mainly Slytherin..." She looked up with a start. "How come you never said this before, Mum? You always said how much fun you had at school!"

Caitlin smiled grimly. "So I did. And I don't regret being in Slytherin for one moment. Slytherin is not an intrinsically evil house. Make no mistake, evil's not unique to us. And some of the finest mages I've ever known are or were Slytherin. But we have produced more dark mages than the other three put together, and they fear us. Rightly, sometimes. All that fear and hate directed at us... Slytherins are driven people anyway. We work hard, but not in the same way as Hufflepuffs, who work because that is what is required of them. We work hard at what we do because we need to prove ourselves. Salazar originally selected those who, once committed to achieving an end, would not stop until they had done it. He did that, I believe, because he knew the magical community would have to retreat and separate from the Muggle community shortly, and he wanted the committed achievers near him. He wanted those who had what it took to withstand the pressure in the long haul. In later years, that has become devalued to mean power-hungry Machiavellian social climbers, who simply crave material success. But the original spirit of Slytherin goes far beyond that. It embraces all who want something more from their lives, who want to be the best they can be and aren't afraid to work to get it. Slytherin goes to extremes far more than most houses. Its best members are often far better, more powerful, more heroic, than most. Its bad ones are truly evil. I assure you, you will find very few average Slytherins. It is for this reason we are so feared. Our good people are envied and held in awe. Our bad ones loathed. None really get respect though. Slytherin power is feared. This leaves Slytherins desperate to prove themselves as worthy of respect. However, it's always harder to draw good feelings than bad. In the end, many of them decide that if they can't be a great good mage, they'll be the best bad guy ever. Which only contributes to our dark reputation, which puts us under more pressure to prove ourselves, which creates more dark mages. It's a vicious circle."

Luella was trying to digest all this. "What does all this have to do with me?" she faltered.

"I'm getting to that," said Caitlin. "There are lots of legends regarding our house, but one of the few that is actually positive concerns the Redemption of Slytherin."

"The Redemption? What's that?" Deanna, on hearing that there was actually a positive legend out there, had perked up immediately.

"It's a prophecy Salazar Slytherin's daughter Morgan made after Slytherin was thrown out of Hogwarts by Godric Gryffindor. She was a seer of some repute and after her father's expulsion, prophesied that the name of Slytherin would be shrouded in darkness for the next thousand years, until two Muggle children would be born and enter Slytherin House. They would be the Heirs of Slytherin and both would bring it greatness. They would be noticed by the following sign - that the first touch of their wand would cause the Slytherin Serpent to rise from it. The first, and I quote, 'Shall come [as] the Destroyer, laying waste to the world.' Then, fifty years later, there shall come 'as a magical flower on a Muggle tree, which yet has roots in magic deep' a girl child, Slytherin's Redeemer, who shall lead all back to the light, unite the warring serpents and bring peace and a new beginning." Caitlin paused and looked at Luella directly.

"The identity of the first child isn't known for certain, but there's a lot of apocryphal evidence that it was Voldemort. That was one reason why so many Slytherins flocked to him - they believed him to be the one who would make Slytherin a name to be proud of again. Unfortunately, they forgot that there would be two children. They also forgot that there are many different kinds of greatness. Voldemort would have put Slytherin on top, but there would have been no peace, no reconciliation, no true redemption. It was the second child's job to bring that about, but Voldemort's propagandists ignored that part of the prophecy."

Luella was growing increasingly uncomfortable. "What part of the prophecy? What does the second child do?"

Caitlin smiled indulgently. After all, it was a lot to take in. "I believe I just told you. She will come as a Redeemer, a healer, one who'll unite us all and rise against Lord Voldemort. She'll be the one to bring true peace and a new beginning. It'll be her who makes peace with our rival house, Gryffindor. At the same time, a warrior wizard, a son of Gryffindor and Slytherin, will emerge from the House of Godric. And the two of them shall bring about a new beginning."

"And that child is me," Luella whispered, feeling her world shatter. No, she wanted to scream, it isn't me, you made a mistake! Yet at the same time, she could feel a sensation inside her, a burning sensation that was shooting up her spine, screaming that yes, this was her destiny, the role she'd been born for. And at the base of her spine, coiled like a serpent that was only just beginning to lift its head and wake, she could feel what could only be described as power.

"Yes, Luella," Caitlin answered softly. "That child is you."

However, the moment did not last. Deanna was having none of this.

"But Voldemort's already been defeated," she pointed out. "He lost all his power in 1981 after attacking Harry Potter, surely?"

"Well, yes, he did," Caitlin admitted. "He lost his power and his physical body that night. But we don't know if he actually died. Knowing how Voldemort operates, I'm sure he didn't. Melissa doesn't think so either, which is why she reacted the way she did today."

"But why?" Luella asked, perplexed. "If I'm the Redeemer, then surely that's a good thing? I mean, she's a Slytherin, after all."

Caitlin shook her head. "Good for her, maybe! Not good for all Slytherins! You're forgetting, Luella. A lot of Slytherins voluntarily supported Voldemort. A lot of them did rather well out of his reign. A lot of them don't *want* to be redeemed! They're quite happy being evil! And if someone were to come along whose destiny would be to change all that..." She let them work out the implications for themselves.

"They'd kill me if they knew," Luella whispered. Any jubilation she might have felt disappeared. It was real. Not heroic. Not glorious. Just very, very dangerous and likely to get worse. She turned to Caitlin, desperate for reassurance. "Help me!" she begged.

Caitlin didn't disappoint. She gently squeezed the terrified youngster's hand, seeming to radiate reassurance. As Luella looked into the older witch's eyes, she could almost feel a voice whispering in her mind that she wasn't to worry, everything was going to be fine. "I will," she said gently. "You have my word. Whatever I can do to help you, I will do. I'm an Auror, I'm deputy head of the biggest department in the Ministry, and I've got considerable powers beyond that. Believe me, Luella, you're not alone. And you will only get more powerful as the years go by. For make no mistake, we are talking about years here. It will be a long time before the fight comes to your door, if indeed it ever does." She sat up, businesslike suddenly. "But we mustn't sit back and wait for it. We need to get ready. And the first thing to do is make sure of our advantage. Which is, Deanna?" She spun round to face her daughter, clearly testing her.

"Er..." Deanna seemed to be at a loss, evidently not having expected this. However, she rallied her wits and soon guessed the answer. "No one outside this room apart from Auntie Mel and Marlie knows about Lu?" she volunteered.

"Precisely," Caitlin smiled. "Now, I don't know what Mel is planning, although I daresay she'll tell me. I also cannot vouch for Marlie, although I strongly suspect that she is being threatened with being forced to wear her mother's old clothes and nothing else until school starts if she breathes a word to anyone."

Luella frowned. "That doesn't sound too bad," she said, confused. Certainly not bad enough to deter Marlie from blabbing.

"You don't know Marlie," said Deanna.

"You've not seen Mel's old clothes," grinned Caitlin. "But I digress. As Deanna said, our advantage is that no one will know you're anything other than an ordinary Muggle-born witch when you start school. And it has to stay that way, Luella, for your own safety. No one must know about what happened this afternoon. No one. Is that clear, both of you?"

"Yes, Mum," Deanna promised instantly.

Luella nodded. "No problem." No way was she telling anyone about this. It sounded like she could have enough problems what with being a Muggle-born, never mind being a future superhero. No, until these alleged super powers and destiny started making themselves known, she was keeping silent.

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The next day, Luella decided to tackle Deanna. *I need to know*, she thought. *Need to know if she'll help me or run.*

She was surprised to find that the Tylers' front door opened before she even had the chance to knock. The hallway, however, was empty.

"Um, hello?" she asked hesitantly. This was creeping her out. "Hello?" she called, stepping inside.

Behind her the door swung shut, the click of the lock fastening sounding horrifically loud in the silence. Luella flinched, before trying to calm herself down. *Quiet you, this is the Tyler house, you've been here often enough.*

"Mrs. Tyler?" she called out, not knowing if Caitlin was at work or not. Her shifts meant she was often in during office hours and who knew where at night. No response though. She must be at work.

"Deanna?" Luella called. Her friend had to be in, surely? "Deanna?" she called again, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

"In here, Lu," a voice answered from the kitchen. Luella sagged with relief. Deanna was in after all. Feeling a little better, Luella went in to find her.

Deanna was sitting at the workbench, a mug of tea before her. Luella's relief died as she saw her. Deanna was staring at a crack in the lino, clearly troubled. She nodded briefly at Luella as she came in, but the smile was a weak one.

"Hey."

"Hey," said Luella nervously. She glanced around. "Your mum not in?"

"At work," said Deanna shortly. "So. The house let you in by itself, did it?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Didn't even have to knock. Freaky, eh?"

"Yeah," Deanna laughed. "Really freaky. To think, all these years you were just the Muggle kid next door, and now you're one of us."

Somehow, Luella did not think Deanna was referring to her being a witch.

"What's the matter, Deanna? Can't handle me being a powerful heiress?" she asked, a little more sharply than she'd intended. Caitlin's remarks on how Muggle-borns were thought of had got to her.

"No, not especially, in fact I'm glad you're my equal," Deanna shot back. "You're not the only Slytherin heiress in this room."

Luella raised an eyebrow. Deanna didn't look like anything other than a normal girl, and her house, despite the general witchiness, was not that of a great family. But then again, Caitlin had said she was from an old family, and then there was that Gringotts vault.

"Another one?" was all she said. "Salazar got around a bit, didn't he? Are there any more I should know about, or is it just the two of us?"

Deanna burst out laughing, shattering the awkward moment. "Lu, you idiot," she spluttered. "Come on, come and sit down. I'll give you a very quick history lesson, so far as I know it."

"Make it quick," Luella warned. "Or if not quick, interesting." Although a bright girl, long lectures bored her to tears.

"I'll try," Deanna grinned. "Basically, Salazar Slytherin married twice. First marriage ended badly, but did result in Morgan. Second marriage was to some blonde tart, and resulted in another daughter."

"Ancestor of yours?" asked Luella with a smile.

Deanna blinked in shock. "Ancestor of mine? Luella Martin, wash your mouth out. No, that daughter went on to found another family entirely. I'm descended from Morgan."

"What?" Luella demanded, piqued. "I thought I was meant to be the Heir of Slytherin."

"And so you are," Deanna soothed her. "It's just you're not the only one. Listen, Morgan had three kids. A son, called Maredudd, and twin daughters, Ninianne and Nimue. Maredudd ap Morgan founded the magical family of Morgan, a former Allied Clan of ours. Most of them got killed during the witch hunts, but a few survived. Ninianne, as the eldest girl, was Morgan's Heiress, and I'm descended from her."

"The eldest girl?" Luella looked at her very sceptically. "Wasn't the eldest son meant to inherit?"

"Matrilineal families are a wonderful thing," Deanna told her. She noticed the blank look on Luella's face and explained with a smile. "Means the women pass on the inheritance. Eldest daughter is in charge, passes everything on to her eldest daughter and so on."

"What a weird idea," said Luella.

"Not really. You're just used to it the other way around," Deanna pointed out. "It's to make sure it all stays within the family - after all, you always know who a child's mother is." Deanna's face darkened. "You never get kids with 'Mother: unknown' on their birth certificate." Deanna had never known her father. According to her mother, he'd died when she was too young to remember. However, that didn't really explain why her mother had told her virtually nothing about him, and the lack of knowledge rankled. Deanna didn't like to pry, though, and just assumed her mother found it too painful to talk about. She would have liked to know more, but it wasn't a big deal. Being part of a matrilinear dynasty certainly helped there.

"Anyway," she continued. "Ninianne's my ancestor. And Nimue, the youngest, well, she's yours."

"Mine?" Luella sat there, disbelieving. "No way. How on earth do you know that?"

Deanna merely sighed. "More explaining. Oh joy. Look, you already know that Muggle kids can develop magical powers, right?"

Luella nodded. Oh boy, did she ever know that.

"Well, that happens quite a bit, and that's fine and good and right. However, what isn't so grand is when the reverse happens."

"A mage's child with no magic?" Luella guessed.

"Got it one. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's pretty devastating. They're called Squibs. And they don't have the best lives."

"I can imagine," Luella said softly. It was one thing growing up Muggle and suddenly finding out you were a witch. But to grow up thinking you had the power of a witch and then discovering you weren't, that you had to either make your way as a misfit in a society dominated by something you could never have, or go and live as a Muggle in a society you knew nothing about... that had to be the worst thing imaginable.

"You get it then. Good," said Deanna. "Because your ancestor Nimue was one."

"What? No way," said Luella scornfully. "How could a powerful seeress have a Squib child?"

"Inbreeding, probably," said Deanna. "Too many purebloods only marrying other purebloods. Does dilute the gene pool. But I digress. Nimue was a Squib, and she lived her life as a Muggle. It wasn't easy for her, but they got her apprenticed to a sympathetic pub landlady, and she made a career for herself as a publican. Married a

Muggle, and died leaving behind seven pubs and five children, all of whom were also Muggles."

"And I'm descended from one of them," said Luella.

"Mum thinks so," said Deanna confidently. "She was telling me about it last night, bits of it anyway. I don't think she told me everything, but what she did tell me seemed to make sense."

Luella tried to digest all this. "Wow," was all she could manage.

"Yeah," said Deanna softly. "Impressive, huh?"

Luella nodded. "I'll say. Two days ago, I'm just a normal kid, who happens to be a witch, now I'm the long lost descendant of a major magical family, with a destiny to fulfil." She looked up at Deanna, remembering why she'd come over. "Deanna, I'm scared."

Deanna hesitated, before reaching out and taking Luella's hand. "So am I," she said softly. "But we'll get through this. I promise you."

"Thanks," Luella whispered, starting to smile. It was what she'd been hoping for, the reassurance that Deanna wouldn't go running off in the other direction, wouldn't abandon her. "We're still best mates, right?"

"A lot more than that, Lu," said Deanna, still holding her hand. "You and I... we're family, Lu. Family."

Family? It dawned on her. Of course. Ninianne and Nimue had been sisters... twins. Which meant that as their respective descendants, they were related.

"Yeah," she said, unsure whether to laugh or cry. "Yeah, I guess we are."

"How'd you feel about that?" Deanna asked, eyes burning with a strange eagerness. "You know, being related to me. OK with having Mum and me for relatives?"

"I can handle it," Luella smiled. "If you promise to help me. Teach me what you know, protect me when I need it, and when I call on you for help, be there for me."

"You have my word," Deanna replied, eyes never leaving Luella's own. "Lu Martin, you have my word."

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It was with trepidation that Caitlin arrived at work that morning. Melissa was rota'd in that day, and probably the first thing she'd do would be to call a meeting on Luella. Great. Dealing with two impressionable young eleven year olds was one thing, explaining things to the head mages of the DDAE was quite another. She really wasn't in the mood to discuss her family history with her workmates.

"Hi, hon!" called Jeremy Abbott, Caitlin's outrageously gay and perennially chirpy PA, as Caitlin arrived at her office.

"Hello yourself," Caitlin purred, brushing her hair back. He was the only man in the department entirely immune to her charms, which is why she never missed the opportunity to use them on him. "How's my favourite boy?"

"Oh, so-so, so-so, darling. How've you been, my dear? You look ravishing, as usual. Is that nail varnish new?" He indicated Caitlin's nails, painted in sparkling deep purple.

"New-ish," grinned Caitlin. "Aphrodite's Blood Nail Varnish, by Medea Nightshade."

Jeremy went into paroxysms of ecstasy. "Oh, I *love* her products! I must get some myself."

"Erzulie Bellina's Hall of Beauty's just ordered some in," Caitlin grinned. "If you're very, very good, I might take you there, get you a make-over done."

Jeremy squealed with delight. "Ooh! How simply delightful! I could do with one too - my cuticles are simply dreadful."

"You poor baby," Caitlin soothed. "It must be awful for you." She changed the subject. Best to get the bad news over with. "So, honey-pie, any messages for me? Or can I get straight on to organising that raid on the Malfoys?"

Jeremy went through his Inbox. "Not a thing, pumpkin. Looks like you can get on with trying to arrest that delectable specimen Lucius Malfoy." He edged nearer, the air of a conspirator about him. "Caitlin, lovey, if you ever *do* manage to get him in here, could you put in a good word for me? He is a total Adonis."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Jeremy, he's a Dark wizard! Alleged ex-L. V. supporter. Not to mention married and apparently straight."

"Not when I'm through, he won't be," said Jeremy lasciviously. "You know, sweetie, I'm sure it's really that slutty wife of his that's into all the Dark magic. He's probably just covering for her. If you put her away, he'll probably turn out to be a big ol' pussycat." He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "My ex-boyfriend Ronan Finnegan does her hair, you know." He glanced around, voice now a whisper. "Terrible split ends!" he hissed.

Caitlin smothered a giggle. Although she had the luxury of her own office, Jeremy's desk was at the end of an open-plan office where all the support staff worked, and she didn't want to look unprofessional. However, the thought of Narcissa Malfoy having split ends was enough to put a smile on anyone's face.

"I'll have a look myself when we do the raid- sorry, *inspection*." Complaints about the department's methods had resulted in some more user-friendly policies. However, Caitlin was a traditionalist at heart, and believed that the old ways had a lot going for them. "Anyway, I'll go and prepare for that. Let me know if anyone calls, won't you?"

"I will," Jeremy called back as Caitlin headed for her own office. "Are you in or out?"

"Out to everyone but Mel!" Caitlin grinned, before unlocking her office door and preparing to head in.

She had almost made it to the safety of her own desk when the intercom on Jeremy's desk sprang to life. It had originally been a brass owl, but a little Transfiguration and several lavish Colouring Charms on Jeremy's part, and it now had the shape of a large pink and red bird of paradise.

"Is that you, Caitlin?" it called out in Melissa Lovegood's voice.

Caitlin swore under her breath. "Yes, it's me," she sighed, turning back. This was going to be one of those days.

"Excellent," the bird answered briskly. "Come to my office, we're having a meeting. You know what it's about."

Caitlin groaned. Judgement Day had arrived. "I'll be there," she sighed, offloading her bag and slinging it inside her office before locking the door again.

Jeremy was looking at her sympathetically. "Tough morning, huh?"

Caitlin nodded wearily. "Like you wouldn't believe."

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Quite a few of her colleagues were already there. Caitlin's heart sank as she took her seat. All the seats were now filled, with her arrival. All of the major players in the department were there. They were also almost all former Slytherins, proving the old adage that the best gamekeepers were reformed poachers. Carmela Lynch, Head of Magical Forensics. Denethor Macnair, the white sheep of his family and Head of the Enforcers, the mages responsible for carrying out sentences. Arwen Summerisle, Head of the Department of Mysteries, which the DDAE had controlled for the past four years. Edmund Blackadder, a Squib born to Slytherin parents and Head of Muggle Affairs, the Department's Fixer and Procurer and the one to see if you needed Muggle transport, a fake passport, a cover-up of a raid or confrontation that got out of hand or anything similar. Marcus Vetinari, the fearsome Chief Prosecutor and Attorney General. And of course, Melissa Lovegood herself, Head of Department, creator and maintainer of one of the most extensive intelligence networks anywhere, and rumoured to be capable of manipulating events around the globe.

"Afternoon, Caitlin," Melissa greeted her. The others in the room looked away, all slightly amused, although they didn't meet her eyes. Marcus was the only one brave enough to smirk openly.

"Sorry I'm late," said Caitlin, hunting around for a good excuse. She opted for a veiled version of the truth. "Something unexpected came up yesterday, and I was up rather late sorting it all out."

Melissa nodded, guessing what she was referring to. "You as well? Thought you might." She turned to address the others. "Handy that the topic came up really. Something unexpected certainly has come up. Hence the emergency meeting and the need for absolute secrecy."

A murmur ran amongst the collected mages. Caitlin could only squirm, hoping that she wasn't called on to contribute more information that was strictly necessary to this meeting.

Marcus Vetinari laughed scornfully. "Absolute secrecy? Melissa, it's always absolute secrecy with you. You start panicking over security breaches if someone finds out what you had for breakfast this morning."

Melissa was ready for him. "Marcus, if someone had your house under enough surveillance to know that, you'd be the first to complain. Incidentally, it was two croissants, one with strawberry jam, one with honey, a bowl of Muggle cereal called Crunchy Nut Cornflakes, and a glass of orange juice."

Marcus stared at her in shock, before swiftly recovering and scowling at her. Everyone else was looking very impressed. Melissa smiled and continued.

"You eat the same thing every morning. Your eldest daughter, who is on the same Quidditch team as my son, described the procedure in great detail last time she visited us. Which gives us three lessons. Lesson one: never be too predictable. Lesson two: always keep your eyes and ears open - information can come from surprising sources. And most important of all, lesson three: for Mercury's sake, keep an eye on your kids."

This last was met with laughter from all of them, except Marcus. Those with children of their own laughed loudest.

"Ah yes," said Melissa quietly. "Children. The next generation. Our hope for the future, and yet, who does not fear what they might do with it? What they might make us endure in our old age, when we're too weak to stop them?"

"Jupiter save us, she's having a midlife crisis," Marcus muttered. Melissa ignored him.

"It is one such child that concerns me today. Who here knows the legend of the Slytherin Redeemer?"

That had them. Not a one had expected that to come up. Not one, save Caitlin.

There was silence. Then a quiet, feminine voice spoke up.

"I know of it." It was Arwen Summerisle, daughter of a prominent, if reclusive, Slytherin-Hufflepuff family, and something of an expert on ancient and little-known lore.

"I know it," said Denethor Macnair coldly. "But I don't think that Death Eater propaganda really has a place in determining policy, do you?"

"The original isn't pro-Death Eater." Edmund Blackadder might be a Squib, but his family had an extensive library, and he made it his business to know anything that might be important. Denied power one way, he was determined to get it another.

"In fact, the original is quite the reverse. I'll quote it for you.

*A millennium of darkness on Slytherin's get,
As all our good deeds you'll forget,
And war shall be the Serpents' fate.*

*From Muggle and womb of a serpent girl,
Shall come the Destroyer, laying waste to the world.
As Heir of Slytherin he shall be known."*

"We all know the legend," Marcus Vetinari interrupted, dispersing the sense of awe that had descended on the room. "We remember what happened when one came among us claiming to be the one who would bring Slytherin greatness! We remember the Muggles killed, the mages raped and murdered, the families torn apart, the lives ruined!" He was staring at Melissa in hatred. "He's been dead eleven years, Melissa. Why resurrect the past now?"

"Because if we don't, it will resurrect itself!" Melissa snarled. "Edmund, the rest of the prophecy, if you please."

Edmund nodded and continued.

*"Then shall come delivery,
As a magical flower on a Muggle tree,
Which yet has roots in magic deep.*

*The Redeemer of Slytherin shall she be.
Yet to achieve her destiny,
A warrior wizard will she need.*

*Of Gryffindor and Slytherin conjoined,
Yet tending towards Godric's side.
He will aid her all the while.*

*They will cause the Dark Lord's fall.
They will bring them, one and all.
At the last, the war will end,
And warring serpents once more be friends.*

And by this sign shall ye know them - when they first lay hands upon their wands, the Serpent of Slytherin shall rise and strike fear into the hearts of all who witness it. And they shall each bear their destiny on their arms as a Mark, never to fade until their fate is complete." He sat back, folding his arms with a smirk of satisfaction.

Carmela Lynch applauded him, impressed. "Ooh, well done, you remembered it all word-perfect! I couldn't have managed it."

"Yes, well, remembering fair words is one thing," Marcus stated coldly. He'd never liked the Squib, and not even Melissa's fondness for the man kept him from letting his dislike show now and then. "Remembering foul deeds is quite another. The last time any among us paraded that prophecy around, our world was nearly destroyed, and only pure chance saved us. There is little to be gained by bringing it up again."

"Not pure chance," Caitlin said softly. She'd remained silent up until now. However, her instincts were telling her it was time to intervene. Melissa was looking a little beleaguered, and she was the only one in the Department who Marcus Vetinari was truly intimidated by.

The lawyer broke off, glancing at her. "Why, what do you have to add, Tyler?" He never used her first name. Always Tyler, or Auror Tyler. One more way of keeping everything formal, everyone in their proper place. It suited her just fine.

"Merely that it wasn't coincidence that the night he fell was the night he finally made an open move against Medea Tyler," Caitlin said neutrally. "She may not have survived, but he never returned either. Call it chance if you will. Indeed, chance it may have been, who knows. I wasn't there when he killed her, and she never told me all her secrets. But I still believe that the Fates were directing that night."

Melissa seized the opportunity to take control while Marcus was distracted. "And the Fates are weaving our destinies yet," she said, getting to her feet with a sweeping motion. "The thousand years are up. The second child lives, and is starting Hogwarts this year."

Silence. The sound of a falling pin would have rung out in the moments that followed.

Then everyone started talking at once.

"Preposterous," scoffed Marcus.

"It cannot be!" cried Carmela.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Denethor demanded.

"But it's just a legend," Edmund whispered.

"All the legends walked on this earth at some point," Arwen said quietly.

"And this one walks now," said Melissa firmly, cutting through the babble. "She's here. She's alive. She's a young Muggle-born who knows nothing about what's about to befall her. And she starts Hogwarts this year."

The room fell silent. No one said a word. Until Caitlin spoke up.

"Er... Actually Mel, that's not **strictly** true."

Melissa sighed wearily. "Oh for gods' sake. Caitlin, how much have you told her?"

"Um... everything?" Caitlin shrank back, preparing herself for the tirade that was almost certainly heading in her direction. Melissa's management style was more Sherlock Holmes than Brian Clough, but all the same it never paid to underestimate her.

"Caitlin!" Melissa cried, exasperated. "I was hoping you'd erase her memory or something, or make up an excuse. I didn't want her to know until she was older."

"Hold on, you mean to say you knew about this?" Marcus demanded. "Why didn't you inform us sooner?"

"Marcus, shut up, I only found out yesterday myself," Caitlin snarled at him, causing the lawyer to edge away from her. She turned back to Melissa. "Look, I had to tell her something. She had to know sooner or later, and I felt it best if I did it then, save her worrying needlessly. Besides, she's a friend of my daughter, who was also there at the time, and I'm not playing about with my own's child's memory, thank you very much."

"Ah well, it can't be helped," Melissa sighed. "Suppose you're right, she had to know eventually. She won't go telling all her friends, will she?"

Caitlin shook her head. "No. Her only really close friend is my daughter, and seeing as they both already know, that's safe enough. I've told them both to tell no one, I think they'll be discreet."

"What about her parents? Do they know?" Melissa asked.

"No."

"Good. Keep it that way," she answered. "They're Muggles. They might not take it well."

"But are you sure it's her?" asked Edmund. "You could be mistaken." Carmela nodded eagerly. Clearly she too was not happy about the rise of the Redeemer of Slytherin either.

"Yes, I'm sure," said Melissa. "I have seen her. I was there when it happened. I saw the serpent rise from her wand with my own eyes. Caitlin saw it too, didn't you?"

Caitlin lowered her eyes. "It's true. When she touched her wand, she made the Slytherin Serpent rise from it, without any intention of doing so, I'm sure. I know this girl, I saw her grow up, she doesn't know the first thing about magic or our world. She couldn't have done that consciously, and in any case, she hates being the centre of attention. I don't want to believe that the Redeemer is here, now, in our time, and that she is a girl I have seen grow up, but I can't deny it. Melissa speaks the truth."

Worried glances were exchanged. For both Melissa and Caitlin to be so certain was not good news.

Carmela Lynch laughed just a little too loudly. "But, for the Redeemer to do her job, she's got to defeat You-Know-Who, right?"

Melissa nodded, but said nothing, silently daring her to tease out the implications.

"But... You-Know-Who's dead, isn't he?" she stammered. "He lost his body and all his power when he attacked the Potters. So how can the Redeemer kill him again?"

Arwen spoke up. "Melissa, there's been no evidence of any organised Death Eater activity or any sign of You-Know-Who ever since. We'd have some warning if he was returning surely?"

"We'd hope to have," replied Melissa. "But You-Know-Who is a tricky customer indeed, and would do his best to keep hidden. And you all know that although he has no body and no power, he is probably still alive in some form or other. Which is why we have to be vigilant at all times."

"Your point being?" Vetinari asked dryly.

"Meaning that the presence of the Redeemer indicates that it's highly likely You-Know-Who will rise again one day. Not immediately, I have no fears on that score. But we must be ever more watchful. We must also take steps to ensure that the Redeemer is safe. If You-Know-Who does return, we need her alive and well to fight him."

"She'll be safe at Hogwarts, though?" Caitlin asked.

Melissa sighed. "Yes, I think Albus Dumbledore will be more than enough protection. But the Redeemer needs more protection than most. She is not a normal student. She is the hope of Slytherin, and if You-Know-Who does come back, the hope of all mages, and the Muggles too."

Denethor looked non-plussed. "So can't you just owl Dumbledore and tell him what he has in his school?"

Melissa pondered this. "Maybe," she answered. "But I wanted to keep her identity secret if possible. If we tell Dumbledore, he might feel obliged to inform the rest of the staff, or act in other ways that might mark her out as special. I don't want anyone knowing she's anything other than a normal girl. If I suddenly seek out the Headmaster of Hogwarts, it might draw unwarranted attention. However, someone at the school needs to know. If there's problems, she'll need an adult contact on hand. What I was thinking is to inform the Head of Slytherin, bring him in."

Marcus shot to his feet. "Melissa, you can't. Do you know who he is? What he is?"

Melissa stared him out. "Of course. I've known him all my life."

"But he's a Death Eater!"

"No, he is not. He was arrested, but never charged. Professor Dumbledore himself has vouched for him." Melissa looked tired, but her voice remained calm.

"He's been wrong about his staff before," Carmela spoke up. "Lycanthra LeStrange is in Azkaban, don't forget."

"Maybe," Melissa fired back. "But Severus Snape isn't."

"Melissa," Arwen put in gently, "are you sure your longstanding friendship isn't prejudicing you about him? We only have Dumbledore's word that he was a spy, and we've got a whole file of evidence proving that he was an active Death Eater for four years, and a more passive one for another four. Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"I'm sure," said Melissa firmly. "He turned himself in while You-Know-Who was at the peak of his power, and the information we got out of him proved, on the whole, reliable. We'd have been overrun by 1978 if it hadn't been for him."

Caitlin had remained silent throughout. She too knew Snape well. Too well. Her feelings about him were far from pleasant, and the thought of having him involved, of possibly having to work with him, made her skin crawl. But then again, he was Head of Slytherin, he did need to know, and seeing as he'd be teaching her daughter, she might have to see him anyway. Like it or not, he already was involved. The question really was, could he be trusted?

Her head said no. He'd betrayed both sides in the last war, over and over again. He'd been a spy, a double agent. Did he even have any loyalties any more? Did he even know what loyalty was? And yet, when she opened her mouth to speak, her own lips betrayed her.

"Bring him in," she found herself saying. "We need him."

Where had that come from? she wondered. Still, too late now. Melissa was looking relieved, Marcus annoyed, Denethor nodding calmly, presumably in approval, Edmund and Carmela surprised, and Arwen looking her over, evidently intrigued.

"Thank you, Caitlin," said Melissa gratefully. "Now, if Caitlin Tyler who actually had first-hand Death Eater experience during the war thinks that he's OK, how about we give him the benefit of the doubt? Hmm? Marcus?" She turned on the lawyer, who glared at her. However, as it was well known that he'd spent most of the war behind a desk, he didn't really have a leg to stand on.

Melissa looked around. None of the others appeared to object. "Excellent," she breathed. "Glad that's sorted out. Right, here's what we'll do. First of all, no one here is to speak of this to anyone outside of this room. That includes colleagues, underlings, friends, family, spouses, anyone. Whether they were Slytherins or not. We don't want to alarm anyone, create a panic, or start rumours. We will inform people on a need-to-know basis only. There is no point in overreacting. Are we agreed?"

There was a murmur of assent. Melissa continued. "Secondly, we must make arrangements for the Redeemer's protection. She must be shielded unobtrusively. I

will inform Professor Snape of the situation and request that he keep an eye on her. Seeing as I know him, it'll look far less suspicious to anyone who might happen to get wind of our meeting. They'll think I'm just dropping in on an old friend. Either that, or if they know his past, they'll think it has to do with that. He can keep an eye on the girl, look after her, and no one need be any the wiser." She paused for breath then looked at Caitlin. "Caitlin, you know her family and live near her, I understand." Caitlin nodded. "In that case, I am asking you to keep an eye on her over the holidays. Do not watch her every move, but do keep tabs on her, and be aware of any unusual activities in her vicinity. Caitlin, above all, be discreet. For the Redeemer to succeed, she will need to be strong-minded and morally secure. I think the best way for that to happen is for her to live as normal a life as possible. She can't do this if we intervene too forcibly. Understand me, Caitlin?"

Caitlin nodded. "I'll try my best, Mel."

"Good one. Finally, it remains for all of us to be extra vigilant. We must keep an eye out at all times for any unusual happenings. Anything that could be a sign of You-Know-Who returning, anyone asking any unusual questions regarding Heirs of Slytherin, or looking into ancient prophecies, or Salazar Slytherin's descendants, or anything like that." Melissa's steely gaze bored into all of them. "Get your underlings involved too, although say nothing of why they're looking. Just say that I've decided to tighten up standards. Hint that I am a deluded, paranoid old war veteran if you have to. Although I'm sure you all do that anyway." She grinned. No one dared laugh. Melissa continued. "I shall be giving a speech to the entire department on this particular theme myself later this week. In the meantime, as my old mentor Alastor Moody used to say, **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" She thumped the table in an impression of Moody so convincing, it caused them all to jump. Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody had been what is delicately referred to as a "character".

Melissa looked around inquiringly. "Does anyone have any questions?" There were none. "Good. In that case, let's get started."

Caitlin stayed behind as everyone else filed out. She wanted a word with Melissa in private.

Melissa looked up with a smile as she noticed Caitlin waiting. "Thanks, Cait," she said warmly. "Thanks for backing me up. Marcus would have had them thinking I'd gone nuts if he'd had his way."

"Could he make his ambitions any clearer if he tried?" Caitlin grinned.

"He thinks he's cunning, but he's not," Melissa smiled grimly. "Which, by the way, is why I'm Head of Department and he just handles court cases. Whereas he seems to think that because he's the most senior wizard in the department, and older than me on top of that, he should have this desk, not me. And then he'll turn around and claim that I'm only here because my father used to have this job."

"It didn't hurt though, did it?" said Caitlin. Melissa was the first witch ever to hold her position, and also the youngest Department Head that the Ministry of Magic had ever had. This was owed in large measure to the fact Melissa's father, Mandragor Harker,

had once held her job, before he'd been killed by Lord Voldemort and his followers. Although Melissa was more than capable of doing her job, her father's legacy had been a major factor in her getting it in the first place, a mere five years ago. Despite the outward sang-froid, she wasn't as secure as she made out.

"Oh, I never said it wasn't one of the reasons," said Melissa. "I just meant it wasn't the *only* one."

"Well, you have my support any day," said Caitlin with a smile. "Those of us who actually saw fighting must stick together. Don't let the desk-bound weasel get you down."

"I try not to," Melissa smiled.

"As I saw," Caitlin remarked, remembering the way Melissa had shot back the sharp responses to every barb Marcus Vetinari had sent her way. "Which reminds me, I wanted to talk to you about Snape."

Melissa sat down, nodding as if she'd expected this. "I thought you might. Don't tell me you've changed your mind. I hope you've got a workable alternative in mind if you have - Marcus'll never let me live it down if I change things now."

Caitlin shook her hand. "No, it's not that. It's just that... I'm not sure I can handle seeing him yet. I mean, last time I saw him..." Her voice faltered, the memory not one she wanted to even think about let alone talk about.

Fortunately, with Melissa, there was no need. "I know," she said. "I'm not expecting you to yet. For now, he'll report to me, and so will you, and you won't have to see him unless something really important happens, and maybe not even then if I can arrange it otherwise. But Caitlin, I can't guarantee that you'll never meet. Sooner or later, you two are going to have to sort things out. I mean, he'll have access to the school records, as soon as he lays eyes on Deanna, he'll know. And when he finds out, well then, you'll have to deal with it, because I can't guarantee his actions."

"I know," said Caitlin softly. "But if I can keep it at bay for as long as I can, then I will. For Deanna's sake if not mine."

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Later that day, at Hogwarts, Professor Severus Snape was in his small, sparsely furnished room, preparing for the start of term, and planning what he would be teaching that year. He liked this time of year the best. No students meant peace, quiet, no demands on his time, no having to deal with uninspiring and uninspired students who seemed to prefer infringing rules to actually learning anything. That was the downside to teaching, it meant involvement with students, most of whom cared little about anything Potions-related. Once they found out Love Potions were banned at school, they seemed to lose all interest. Even the Slytherins weren't what they used to be. Voldemort had taken all the best ones, it seemed, either killing them or recruiting them. No, the recent crop of Slytherins had seriously declined in quality. They were all so depressingly average. Even the bad ones were no longer master criminals or

calculating plotters, merely bullies and braggarts. And the good ones were so worthy, it was unbelievable. Debra Stormosi was the best of a bad lot. Now she was approaching the model of what a Slytherin should be. If only she was a little less respectable. That was the problem these days, the Slytherins just didn't want to be seen as special anymore.

"Salazar Slytherin, what has your house become?" Severus mused idly to himself, gazing into space.

The sound of the fireplace flaring into life distracted him. Severus turned around with a frown. Who could want to talk to him at the moment? Not one of the parents, surely. Well, if it was, they could go hang. The students weren't his responsibility until September. There were two weeks to go yet.

It turned out to be Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Good afternoon, Severus," he said amiably. Severus glared at him. He'd been working for Dumbledore long enough to know that his amiable face was no reliable indicator of what was to come, and it invariably meant trouble.

"Albus," he greeted the other wizard. "Can I help you?" This phrase, translated from Slytherin-speak, meant approximately 'Tell me what you're after and be quick about it, and may the gods help you if I deem you to be wasting my time'.

Albus Dumbledore chuckled. He'd been Severus's employer long enough to become more fluent in Slytherinese than some of the Slytherins.

"Don't worry, Severus, I'm not here to bother you. It's just that I have Melissa Lovegood on the Floo for you, and I was wondering if you wanted to talk to her or not."

Now that was an entirely different proposition.

"Mel?" Severus's demeanour changed in a second. "Well, don't keep the good lady hanging around waiting! She's an important government official. Put her through! Her time is precious."

"As you wish, Severus," Dumbledore smiled. "Do you want to speak to her in person, or is the Floo grate sufficient?"

"In person, if she can," Severus replied.

"I'll see what I can do," Dumbledore answered, his head fading away. Seconds later, Melissa Lovegood's head appeared in its place.

"Severus!" she smiled. "How are you?"

"So far, my dear, it's been a dull, uneventful afternoon, with nothing of any importance occurring whatsoever. In short, heaven. You?"

"Dull, uneventful day?" sighed Melissa. "I used to have them once." She blinked and gazed at him intensely. "Severus, can I come in? This is so impersonal, and I'm not sure about the security of this Floo connection. Anyone on the Hogwarts intragrate could listen in on us."

Severus privately doubted that any of his colleagues would bother, but nevertheless, Dumbledore at least knew this conversation was taking place, and for some reason, anything that so much as hinted at his personal affairs seemed to draw his colleagues like moths to a flame. "Yes, of course you can, my dear. Come through."

The flames leapt up, and the figure of Melissa Lovegood emerged into Severus's underground office. He immediately went to steady her.

"Careful there, it's a little disorientating. Can I get you anything?"

"No thanks, I'll be fine," Melissa replied. She gave him an impish little smile from behind her Gucci glasses. "But you might want to pour yourself a brandy. I think you're going to need it."

Severus narrowed his eyes. She was toying with him. This was never a good sign. Normally, Melissa looked and acted deadly serious. She only ever acted like this on two occasions - when she was drunk, and when under stress. She didn't smell of alcohol.

He got up and opened a nearby cabinet, producing a bottle of whisky and two tumblers. Pouring himself a measure, he offered the bottle to Melissa.

"No," she said firmly. "Not yet."

Not yet?? What did that mean? Did she think she might need a shot later on? Severus decided to make it a double.

"Wise choice," Melissa commented. "You'll need it. Severus, this isn't a social call. Something's come up. Something big. And... I'm going to need your help."

Severus nodded, sipping his drink. He knew it. Had known it since she'd come in, grinning, staring at him like she'd taken some Muggle adrenaline potion. She was never normally this hyperactive. Someone who didn't know her as well as he did might have simply assumed that she'd just had some very good news which she just had to share. Severus knew better. This news was momentous, alright. But not necessarily good.

"What do you need?" he asked gently. He knew better than to refuse her. Beneath her apparent euphoria lay sheer, naked terror. If he could help her, he would.

"Severus," she began, "it's about the Redeemer Prophecy."

Severus nearly dropped his drink. Trying to stay calm, he very carefully lowered the tumbler, placing it on the desk. Was this what he thought it was?

"What about it?" he asked, his voice beginning to shake.

"It's true!" she whispered, her hands flying to her face. "It's true, Severus, it's real, it's happening, it's..." She shook her head, unable to speak.

"What's happening?" Severus asked, his voice rising. He didn't think he could take much more of this. "What's real? The Prophecy?"

Melissa nodded. "She's here, Severus," she whispered. "The Redeemer."

Severus fell back into his chair. He didn't know what to say. Truly had no idea how to react. He'd heard this prophecy since he was a boy, been told that his house, his family, had been condemned to darkness centuries before, but that one day would come the Redeemer who would unite them all and restore their former glory. It had been a childhood dream, a consolation that one day, better days would come. And yet, it had also been a proverb, applied to something longed for yet unlikely to happen for a long time if at all: 'you'll be waiting for that until the Redeemer comes' or 'the Redeemer'll be here before that happens'. Never had he thought for even one second that it would happen in his lifetime.

"Severus?" Melissa asked anxiously. "Are you alright?"

He reached out and drank some more whisky. "Is it true?" he asked, shaking.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"Who is it?"

"She's eleven years old," said Melissa. "She's a young Muggle-born girl from Surrey, she's led a very sheltered life, and she's completely unprepared for what's ahead of her. She's young, she's vulnerable, and my contacts tell me that she's absolutely terrified."

"Not quite the all-conquering hero I'd been led to expect," said Severus, trying to stop the whisky going everywhere as he refilled his glass.

"She's eleven years old," said Melissa, a hint of savagery in her voice. "What do you expect at that age? She hasn't even begun her education yet. Which is where you come in."

Severus stopped in mid-action. Lowering the bottle, he looked up and stared stright into Melissa's eyes.

"And what exactly am I meant to do?" he said sardonically.

"She starts Hogwarts this year, in just a few weeks," said Melissa. "She'll most likely be in Slytherin. Your House, Severus! She'll be in your care, under your protection. Severus, I need you to look after. Guide her, train her, protect and watch over her. You're best placed to do so, and you're one of the few people I trust. Severus, please!"

"Me?" Severus blinked. "Act as mentor to the Slytherin Redeemer?" He looked at his glass, toying with it before lifting it and draining the contents in one go. He slammed the glass back down again. "Melissa, I can't!" he choked.

Melissa sat up. She clearly hadn't expected that. "Why not?" she said. "I thought you'd want in on something this big!"

Severus shook his head. "Mel, you don't understand. It's not that I don't want to. It's that I can't!"

"Can't... Why not?" snapped Melissa. "Why can't you mentor her? You're already her teacher, or will be."

Severus looked away. How to even begin describing how he felt at the news of the Redeemer's coming? Yes, he wanted it, of course he did. And yet the thought terrified him.

"Melissa," he said softly. "I never told you exactly what prompted me to join the Dark Lord, did I?"

Melissa backed away, not at all sure she wanted to hear this. "I understand it was a failed love affair. That's what you told me."

"Well yes, I did, and that is the main reason. But there was another reason, one event that decided me."

"And that was?" Melissa asked faintly.

"The Redeemer," Severus said softly, so softly Melissa could barely hear him. "That's what. You have no idea, absolutely no idea, how we used and abused the concept back then. We used the prophecy as a recruiting aid, Mel. Told newcomers that the Dark Lord was the Heir of Slytherin come to lead us back to glory, and purify our name and our house. And we told them that in time to come there would rise a Muggle-born called the Redeemer, who would fill our house with Mudbloods and Squibs, and make us subservient to all the other houses. She would make us slaves, and for that reason, we had to destroy her and all those who would support her."

"I know that, Severus, I did see Death Eater propaganda," said Melissa softly. Severus shook his hand, slamming his fist into the table.

"You don't understand!" Severus snarled. "My family was an old one, Mel! My mother claimed descent from Morgan! A junior line, to be sure, but a line nonetheless. We knew the old prophecy, knew what it really meant! I'd been brought up believing the Redeemer to be our foretold saviour!" Severus looked away, unable to face Melissa now. "And all because a Muggle-born who I'd once counted a friend left me for someone else, I turned my back on the whole cause and betrayed the Redeemer. I willingly lied about her, Mel. I told a whole generation of young mages that the Redeemer was a threat to our society. And all because I wanted revenge on my Muggle-born ex-girlfriend."

"That was a long time ago, Severus," said Melissa quietly, although if the truth were told, she was inwardly cursing the fact that Lord Voldemort's anti-Redeemer propaganda had left her facing an uphill struggle. "You weren't to know."

"No, but I should have," Severus replied bitterly. "I should have known better, Mel. I *did* know better. And now she's here and she's going to be in danger, far more danger than she otherwise would have been, because I knew who she really was and lied."

"Which is all the more reason for you to help me now," said Melissa, getting to her feet with a flourish. Time to pull rank. If he wanted to wallow in self-pity and general unworthiness, then so be it. She couldn't talk him out of it, not when he'd spent ten years and more talking himself into it. But she could perhaps make use of what she had. "Yes, she's going to be in a lot of danger. And yes it is certainly your fault." She leaned over the desk, staring deep into his eyes, her face inches from his. "Which is why I'm **ordering** you to make it up to her. Seeing as it's you who put her in danger in the first place, I'm making it your job to try and protect her from the fall-out. If you helped get her into this mess, then you can damn well try and get her out of it. Do you understand me, Severus?"

Silence. For a good few minutes, Severus and Melissa did nothing but stare into each other's eyes. Then Severus began to smile. Laughing, he turned and broke the deadlock.

"Oh, Mel. Mel, Mel, Mel," he laughed. "I've got to hand it to you, you're good. Looking at it from that point of view, I practically owe the girl a life-debt, don't I?"

Got him. Damn, I'm good. A class act bit of manipulation if I do say so myself.
Managing to keep herself from smiling, she sat back down again.

"Yes, Severus, I rather think you do," she said, offhand.

"Alright, alright," he sighed. "I'll do as you ask. I'll mentor the girl. Does she know who she is yet?"

"She does. My vacation contact went and told her the story, without my prior authorisation, I might add."

Severus nodded. "Good. Makes my job easier. I pity the poor underling you've got looking after her at the moment."

Melissa wisely decided not to mention who this underling actually was.

"Well, seeing as I've made her the Redeemer's permanent holiday contact, I think she's been duly punished. I was lucky that the girl happened to have a witch from my department living near her."

"Lucky indeed," Severus murmured. He refilled his glass. "Shall we drink a toast?"

"I don't see why not," Melissa smiled, holding out her glass. "What to?"

"How about the future?" Severus suggested. "That's always a good one."

"To the future then," said Melissa as Severus filled her glass. They drank a toast.

"To the future," Severus murmured. It occurred to him that Melissa hadn't actually told him who the Redeemer was. Still, it didn't really matter. He could work it out himself once the Sorting was done with. Right now, he was picturing Slytherin House respected for once. Being able to introduce himself as Head of Slytherin without feeling like he had to apologise for the fact. Slytherin triumphs being applauded by people from outside the house for once, instead of the other houses falling behind whoever was most likely to beat Slytherin. Snape grinned, feeling good for the first time in a long while. Even though the Redemption was likely to be some way off, it was highly unlikely that the Redeemer could be anything other than special. Some decent Slytherins at last! He could hardly wait. "It's been too long." Snape murmured softly. This looked like it was going to be an interesting year.

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Chapter Four: Arrival at Hogwarts

The weeks passed swiftly, and September the first soon came round. After much fussing and emotional goodbyes, Luella left her parents on the main concourse of King's Cross Station, and, gathering her courage, followed Caitlin Tyler through the ticket barrier on to Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" she asked Caitlin as the two of them eyed up the worryingly solid barrier.

Caitlin nodded. "Positive. I used it all the time when I was at Hogwarts."

"Which was how many years ago?" Deanna asked, standing safely out of reach.

"Not that many!" Caitlin snapped. "Just for that, you can go first."

"Suits me," Deanna shrugged. Wheeling her trolley forward, she lined it up very precisely with the barrier. "Now, the way to do this is quickly. Like so." Mounting the back of the trolley, she pushed off from the ground and went careering off. Luella shut her eyes, awaiting the inevitable crash. To her surprise, there was no sound. Opening her eyes again, she started to see that her friend had disappeared. She turned to Caitlin, who was looking pained.

"One of these days that girl is going to seriously injure herself," she sighed. She noticed Luella looking at her and smiled. "Don't worry, Luella. It's not compulsory to do it that way. Come on, let's go through. Just take it slowly, I'll be right behind you."

Luella gritted her teeth and went for it, pushing the trolley before her. Behind her, she could sense Caitlin steering her in the right direction. She hesitated as she approached the barrier, but a tap on the shoulder from Caitlin gave her confidence.

"Just go for it, you'll be fine," she heard Caitlin say. Taking a deep breath, she drove into the barrier.

Instead of the crash she'd been expecting, there was simply blackness and a whooshing noise for the briefest of instants. Luella staggered forward, her sense of balance temporarily gone, and then she was there, on the platform, clinging on to a luggage trolley, with Deanna and Caitlin helping her steady herself. She'd made it.

"See?" Caitlin was saying. "That wasn't so hard was it?"

"Is this it, then?" Luella asked, her dizziness clearing.

"Sure is!" Deanna spoke up. "Isn't this place stunning?"

Luella looked around her. The place certainly was amazing. The platform itself looked like a huge Victorian station, with none of the grime and concrete normally associated with British Rail. Everywhere she looked, there were witches and wizards

shepherding their black-robed offspring around, and lots of Muggle-borns wandering around looking a bit lost. Nearest to them was a plump red-haired woman telling off a couple of similarly red-haired twins, who it seemed were also Hogwarts first years. However, the most imposing sight of all was the steam train next to them.

"Wow!" Luella was impressed. "What is that?"

"The Hogwarts Express!" Deanna told her. "That's taking us to school."

"It is?" Luella still couldn't get her head around the idea of going to school on a train at all, much less a steam one. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd even seen one close up. True, Deanna had mentioned the Hogwarts Express before now. Words, however, had not done it justice. "It's huge!" she whispered.

"Needs to be, to get you all to school," said Caitlin dryly. "There's three hundred of you going after all." Leaving Luella to digest that information, she turned away, her attention distracted by someone else emerging on to the platform. "Melissa!" she called.

Sure enough, Melissa Lovegood had appeared, followed by her daughter and by an older boy in black robes with green-and-silver trimmings who could only be her son. Luella tensed. Last time they'd all met up, it had been all she could do to keep Deanna and Marlie from coming to blows. *Please*, she prayed to herself. *Please don't let them start a fight right here on the platform. Not in front of all these people.* She didn't think she could stand the thought of her school career starting like that.

Melissa and Caitlin's greeting was rather more conventional this time, consisting of a handshake and an embrace.

"What, no Auror greeting this time?" Luella asked Deanna.

Deanna shook her head. "It's not generally considered a good idea to sneak up on my mum," she said delicately. She turned on a smile as Melissa turned her attention their way and the usual formalities were exchanged. Then, the two adults turned away to discuss other things, and the children were left on their own. *Here we go*, Luella thought. *Fighting time.*

She was in luck. Deanna seemed to be feeling positively friendly. Ignoring Marlie entirely, she headed straight for her brother.

"Hey, Mikey!" she said with a smile.

To Luella's surprise, the older Lovegood seemed equally pleased to see Deanna. "Hello, Trouble," he replied with a grin. "All ready for Hogwarts?"

"Too right!" Deanna laughed, before turning to Luella. "Mike, this is my friend Luella. She's coming to Hogwarts too. Lu, this is Mike Lovegood. He's a friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," said Mike. His blue eyes looked Luella up and down, as if he was trying to remember where he'd seen her before. "Marlie told me about you."

Luella was instantly on her guard. *Told him what, exactly?* She shot a glance at Marlie, but her face was giving nothing away.

"Has she?" Luella asked. "What's she been saying?"

"That's just it," said Mike, frowning. "Absolutely nothing. She just keeps dropping hints that you're one to watch."

Marlie looked away, trying to appear innocent but without success. Luella could only sigh in frustration. Great, there went her cover, at least partially. She'd hoped to get by without drawing attention to herself. Nice one, Marlie. All of a sudden, a fight between Deanna and Marlie didn't seem like such a bad idea.

Marlie, however, proved to be adept at covering her tracks.

"That's cause she's really smart," she said, putting an arm around Luella's shoulder with a decidedly overfriendly smile. "Aren't you, Lu?"

"When it comes to Muggle things, yeah," said Luella. "Not sure how I'll do at magical things, though." She smiled nervously, trying to look for all the world as if she was just another Muggle-born off to Hogwarts for the first time, and feeling nervous. Not a foretold saviour. Oh no. In no way was she different to any other kid at this school in the slightest.

Mike seemed to buy this excuse and the awkward moment passed. Deanna changed the subject with but a fleeting glare in Marlie's direction, asking Mike who he thought was going to win the league that season. As the conversation moved on to matters barely comprehensible to Luella, Mike and Deanna moved away, leaving Luella alone with Marlie.

"So, er, hi?" said Marlie sheepishly.

"Hi yourself," said Luella, still wary. Marlie seemed friendly enough... but Luella still wasn't sure she entirely trusted her. She wanted to ask exactly what Marlie had said to her brother about her, but decided that it probably wasn't a good idea. She didn't seem to have said anything she shouldn't, and Luella for one didn't want to encourage her. So she decided to stay on safer ground.

"So how long have Deanna and your brother been friends then?" she asked.

"Ages," Marlie sighed. "Virtually ever since she started coming round. Tyler hated me on sight, so I think Mum told Mike to befriend her. So he did, and gods know how, but the two of them actually decided they liked each other. And now, every time she comes round, the two of them go off together and start playing Risk and Monopoly. Still, if the geeks want to go off and play together, that's fine by me."

Luella turned to look at Deanna and Mike again. The two of them were now engaged in a heated debate over the relative merits of what appeared to be two sports teams, the Harpies and Falmouth. It struck Luella that she barely knew her best friend at all. All these years and she'd been leading this completely separate life in which she

played war games and debated Quidditch, and appeared to be a devoted fan of the Holyhead Harpies. And Luella had known nothing about any of it, and if fate hadn't made her a witch, she would know nothing about it now. The thought sobered her, as she realised that the previously close-knit, almost blood-bound friendship she'd had with Deanna before was by no means a given now that they were both out of the Muggle world.

"Everything's going to be so different now," she whispered to herself.

"What, you hadn't worked that out when that snake appeared?" Marlie murmured in her ear.

That had her. In a moment, Luella had turned on Marlie.

"What do you know about that?" she demanded. Time to find out exactly what Marlie knew. Auror's daughter she might be, but Marlie had yet to earn Luella's trust.

"Calm down, your secret's safe with me," said Marlie, backing away, slightly taken aback by Luella's outburst. "Mum told me everything when we got home." She looked around her, trying to see if anyone was listening in. "But this isn't really the place. We can talk more when we get to school. I take it Tyler knows too?"

"Caitlin Tyler told us both when we got back," said Luella, stony-faced and not at all sure she wanted Marlie Lovegood in on things. Still, it didn't seem like she had any say in the matter.

"That's good," Marlie nodded. "Good we all know, it makes things easier."

"What things??" Luella definitely didn't like the sound of that. Exactly what was being planned for her?

"You know, things," said Marlie. "Fighting and arse-kicking type of things. With possibly some plotting and scheming type things thrown in for good measure. At least, that's kinda what I was hoping for, anyhow. Is there likely to be any of that along the way?"

"Er... I hadn't really thought about it," said Luella weakly, not sure how to react to this unbridled enthusiasm. "I'm sure there will be eventually." She wondered exactly how long it would take before Marlie's commitment waned, or if Marlie was actually any good in a fight. Probably not, she suspected.

"Cool," Marlie grinned. "In that case, you can count me in." She took Luella by the arm, not noticing or more likely, not caring about, Luella's reluctance, and proceeded to head towards the train.

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It wasn't long before they were ready to leave. Melissa and Caitlin had taken leave of their offspring with the usual warnings of what would happen if they misbehaved, requests to take care and in Melissa's case, telling Mike to look after his sister.

Fortunately for Luella, he'd complied virtually immediately and taken not just Marlie but Deanna temporarily off her hands, leaving her free to explore for a bit. For some reason, someone or something seemed to be calling her, telling her that there was something she had to find, something she had to do or all would be lost. It was most strange. She just hoped that whatever it was would prove easy to find.

She wandered the corridors aimlessly, trying to avoid getting jostled by all the other students racing up and down the corridor, all shouting and yelling to their friends. She did get bumped into occasionally, but for the most part, they acted as if she wasn't even there.

However, that didn't mean Luella was exactly enjoying fighting her way down the packed corridor. Intuition be damned, she'd by now decided that there was nothing here that wouldn't be waiting for her at Hogwarts, and abandoned the quest in favour of hunting down Deanna. No sign of her anywhere though, nor were the two Lovegoods anywhere to be seen. Finally, she gave up on them entirely and dived into an empty compartment just to get out of the crowd.

Except it wasn't as empty as she'd thought. Seated in one corner, looking up from the book she'd been reading, which, Luella noticed, was a Muggle one, was a young girl with thoughtful brown eyes and reddish-brown hair, wearing the all-black robes which marked her out as a fellow first year. She was staring at Luella as if she'd just seen Elvis walk in.

"Um, hello?" said Luella nervously. The girl was unnerving her a little, although maybe she was just surprised at being barged in on.

The red-haired girl seemed to gather her wits and smiled. "Hi there," she said, in a soft-spoken voice with an accent that Luella didn't think she'd heard before. It sounded a bit American, but wasn't. "You're a first year too, hey."

Luella glanced down at her robes. "Yeah," she admitted. "Muggle-born too. Doubly the new girl."

"Muggle-born?" The other girl raised an eyebrow. "Really? Although I suppose..." She indicated the seat opposite. "Take a seat, why don't you? I'm Rianne. Rianne Stormosi."

"Stormosi? Are you Italian then?" asked Luella, wondering why Rianne didn't sound Italian. Not English, certainly, but not really Italian either.

"My dad is," Rianne said with a grimace. "Me, I'm not entirely sure what I am. My mum was Welsh, I was born in Wales, I grew up travelling around the States, and I came back to Wales when my oldest sister started Hogwarts. That was five years ago. I'm kind of a Welsh-Yankee hybrid. That's what the accent is by the way. Hollywood meets the Rhondda."

"I did wonder," said Luella with a smile. Her earlier nervousness was melting away as she began to warm to Rianne. Rianne seemed as adrift in the world as she felt at the

moment. She hoped that they ended up in the same house, whatever it was. "So why all the travelling then?"

"I'm really not sure," said Rianne, frowning. "My mum died not long after I was born, and we took off not long after that. I don't think Dad could bear to stay in the family home without her, so off we went. The States is something of a frontier land for our kind, that's why he chose it. No one to know us, no one to bother us."

"That must have been pretty bad," said Luella softly. She couldn't imagine how that had been for her, never knowing her mother, no permanent home to call her own. It wasn't a life she'd have wanted.

"Eh, don't feel sorry for me." Rianne brushed off her sympathy, not unkindly. "It wasn't so bad. I'd never known anything else, and it was kinda fun, travelling around, never in the same place twice. I was most upset when we finally did settle down. So boring, stuck in the same town all the time. Didn't seem right."

Luella had to smile at that. How many times had she wished she could be somewhere else? Now that Rianne mentioned it, travelling didn't seem such a bad option.

"Well, if you take to the road again, let me know, I might come and join you," Luella grinned.

"It's not a life for everyone," Rianne warned her. "Not if you're not used to it. But then, I don't think we really choose the life we lead. It has a tendency to choose us, wouldn't you say?" She looked at Luella then, and Luella had the strange feeling that, even though she'd told Rianne next to nothing about herself, not even her name, Rianne already knew everything of importance about her, and that nothing she said would be news to her. It was an unnerving feeling.

"It certainly does," she found herself saying, thinking of her own secret. Hot on the heels of that thought came another one, that her status as Slytherin Redeemer also wouldn't shock Rianne. She wasn't sure whether to be angry or worried. However, for some reason, it didn't seem to matter. There was something solid about Rianne, even though she was very slenderly built and on the tall side. Something firm, earthy, safe about her. She was someone you could rely on, Luella could feel that very strongly. *I really hope she's in my house.* She wanted to be friends with Rianne, that she was sure of.

"You haven't told me who you are yet," Rianne cut in. She seemed to be sizing up Luella very carefully, although she seemed interested as opposed to wary.

"Luella," Luella answered. "My name's Luella. Luella Martin."

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Nice name. Means 'renowned of the Elven Folk', you know." She looked Luella over again. "Suits you," she said with a mysterious smile.

"Elven folk?" Luella asked. "Who are they?"

"A race of the past, who left this Earth long ago. But some of their descendants still remain, and their powers are still to be found in those of the old blood even today." Rianne held out her hand in greeting. "Honoured to meet you."

Luella took it, no longer put off by Rianne's oddness, but intrigued rather. "Pleased to meet you too," she said. They squeezed each other's hands, and for a moment that hung in the air for an eternity, their eyes met. *Power still to be found in those of the old blood. Are you one of them, Rianne Stormosi? Do you know that I might be too?* Even as she thought that, she somehow knew that Rianne almost certainly did know. The thought didn't bother her, although she knew full well it should. All she felt was that she was looking into the eyes of someone akin to her in many ways, someone she could relate to on many, many levels. Looking into Rianne's eyes, she felt as if she'd come home.

They stayed like that for a while, before Rianne let her go, shaking her hair back.

"So, you want to spend the journey with me? I could do with the company, and apart from my two older sisters, you're the only person I know here."

"I'd love to," Luella smiled. "The alternative is trying to keep my best friend and her worst enemy from killing each other, and to be honest, it's getting a little tiring."

"Getting to the stage where you'd actually happily see them murder each other just to get some peace, is it?" Rianne grinned. Luella could only nod in agreement.

"Well, never mind," Rianne continued. "Assuming we're both in the same house, and maybe even if we're not, you and I can disappear and leave them to it. Either that or concoct a diabolical scheme to murder them both and make it look like an accident."

Luella couldn't help but laugh at that. "We can't do that!" she choked. "Their mothers'd kill us!"

"I notice you're not objecting on ethical grounds though," said Rianne with a grin. "You Slytherin, you."

Luella started. *Oh god, please no. I don't want to be a Slytherin! Don't want to have to fight...*

"Slytherin?" she whispered.

Rianne froze briefly, but she was quick to recover. "Yeah, you know. Slytherin. Les Verts et Argents. House of the Cunning and Ambitious. Official mascot the snake, unofficial mascot the weasel."

Luella forced out a nervous laugh, causing Rianne to look positively insulted.

"What?" she demanded. "What's wrong with you? Are my witty quips only worth a titter?"

"It's not that," said Luella uneasily. "It's just that I heard Slytherin's the evil house."

"Don't believe everything you hear then," Rianne retorted. "My mother was one. So are my sisters. And chances are I'll be one too." She watched Luella carefully as she said this. "Yeah, that's right," she breathed. "I'm a future Slytherin. You still wanna hang with me?"

Luella could only nod wordlessly, as relief started spreading through her system. *We'll be in the same house. Rianne's a Slytherin too.*

"Can I?" she whispered.

Rianne's indignation vanished in a second, as she smiled back at her. "Any time, Luella. Any time." They fell silent for a while, until Rianne spoke up again.

"So whose kids are they then?"

"Eh?" Luella had completely forgotten about Deanna and Marlie in the interim.

"Your feuding buddies," Rianne pressed. "Whose kids are they? You mentioned their mothers being people you wouldn't want to piss off."

"Oh, right. So I did," said Luella, gathering her wits. "Er, they're Melissa Lovegood and Caitlin Tyler's daughters."

That got Rianne's attention. "They're who?" she shrieked. "Lovegood and Tyler??"

"You've heard of them?" Luella asked.

Rianne nodded as if not having heard of them was akin to not knowing who the Beatles were. "Oh have I ever!" she gasped. "Lovegood and Tyler are only the two toughest Aurors in the Ministry! *Duwies*, Lu, forget I ever even mentioned killing their kids. In no way would I want those two on my case. Gods, Lu, *everyone's* heard of Lovegood and Tyler." And then Rianne had her head in her hands, moaning softly. "Hades, they were Slytherins too. Their kids are in our year, likely to be in our house, and they hate each other." She finally lifted her eyes. They had the look of a condemned soul. "Luella, it's going to be hell on earth."

"I know," Luella sighed. "Rianne, if murder's out of the question, how about we just commit suicide together instead? Maybe the note will prompt their better natures to behave themselves."

"Not any use to us if we're dead, is it?" Rianne snapped. However, she was considering the possibility. "Maybe we could fake it. How's your acting?"

"Not sure. Never had to fake my own death before. Yours?"

"Not up to that, I'm sure," Rianne sighed. "We can only hope the Mutually Assured Destruction scenario wins out. For them anyway."

"For who?" another voice put in. Luella felt her heart sink. It was Marlie, back again. She waltzed in without waiting to be invited and sat down next to Luella, looking at

both girls hopefully. She seemed to notice that they'd both stopped talking. "Hey, don't stop the conversation on my account!" She nodded at Luella. "Go on. Say stuff. Chat. Exchange witty quips and banter. Don't mind me." She sat back expectantly.

"Is this...?" Rianne asked, the unspoken words being 'one of the two you mentioned earlier?'. Luella nodded.

"I see," said Rianne. "And is she...?" The unvoiced words this time were 'the best friend or worst enemy?' Luella obliged with an introduction.

"Rianne, this is Marlie Lovegood," said Luella, giving Rianne a meaningful look. "Melissa Lovegood's daughter. I mentioned her earlier."

"That you did," said Rianne softly. "How long have you known each other?"

"Oh, we met over the summer," Marlie grinned. "We were in Diagon Alley shopping, and it turns out her best friend's mum is good friends with my mum. Small world, eh?"

"Small indeed," Rianne murmured. "And you're the daughter of the Webmistress. Named after a fallen comrade in arms of hers."

"Yeah," Marlie sighed. "One of her Auror mates snuffs it a month before I'm born, and hey presto, I get named after her."

"Who was that?" Luella asked. For some reason, she couldn't imagine a tough, Dark-Arts fighting, warrior witch calling herself Marlie. It wasn't exactly the most frightening name imaginable.

"Marlene MacKinnon," Marlie said. "That's what Marlie's short for, by the way. In case you were wondering."

"Oh. Right." Luella pondered that for a bit before asking the next question. "So why does no one use your full name then?"

Marlie shrugged dismissively. "Superstition," she sighed. "Load of rubbish if you ask me, to give me a cool name like Marlene and then ban me from using it."

Luella looked to Rianne for an explanation.

"It's considered unlucky to name someone after a person who died violently," Rianne explained. "Apparently it's like you're forcing someone else's karma on the child. It's said that the dead person's spirit will come back and take the child's soul over. So you have to either vary the name a bit or call them by a nickname so the spirit gets confused."

"Load of rubbish, if you ask me," Marlie opined.

Luella wasn't quite so sure. "Didn't you say earlier that you'd be well up for fighting and general arse-kicking?" she asked shrewdly.

Marlie just smiled, unbothered by the inconsistency. "Well, yeah. But I wouldn't want to *have* to fight. Not like an Auror."

"Mindless violence just a hobby for you then, is it?" asked Rianne innocently. Marlie flashed a glare at her.

"Luella, who's your friend?" Marlie asked coldly. Clearly that last comment had got to her.

Luella was about to speak when Rianne cut in. "Name's Rianne. Rianne Stormosi. Ring any bells?"

It certainly did. Marlie stared back, open-mouthed, her eyes widening.

"Oh my god!" she squealed, clapping her hands to her face. "You're Alfredo Stormosi's daughter!"

"Who?" asked Luella in confusion, the name meaning nothing to her. Rianne for her part was sitting back, smiling smugly at Marlie.

"Why don't you tell her, Lovegood?" she said. Marlie duly obliged.

"He used to be the Beater for the Falcons and Italy," Marlie whispered, awestruck. "He was really good, one of the best! My brother practically idolises him, which is partly why he hangs out with his daughter. His other daughter, that is." Recognition seemed to dawn. "Hey, you're Kat's sister!"

Rianne nodded. "That's right. And you're Mikey Lovegood's little sis. He's mentioned you."

"Really?" Marlie's eyes narrowed. "What's he been saying about me?"

"Not much," Rianne replied with a grin. "You only seemed to get mentioned in sentences starting with 'Don't worry, Kat, Rianne's not as bad as...!'"

Marlie's jaw dropped again. "The cheeky...!" She shut her mouth again, turning on the charm once more. "Please ignore him. Like most older siblings, he likes nothing better than to badmouth his younger sister. I'm sure you know the feeling, having two of your own."

Rianne had to agree. "You have a point," she conceded. However, she was prevented from saying anything further by Deanna's arrival.

"There you are, Lu, I've been looking for you every-" She stopped in midsentence as she noticed Marlie. "Oh," she said flatly. "You're here."

Marlie, still starstruck by the presence of the child of one of her idols, quite forgot she and Deanna were meant to be mortal enemies.

"Tyler, you'll never guess whose daughter this is!" she enthused. "Only Alfredo Stormosi's kid!"

Deanna too temporarily forgot that Marlie was no friend of hers. "Really?" she asked wide-eyed. "What, *the* Alfredo Stormosi?"

"The one and only," said Rianne, amused.

"Wow." Deanna sank down into the seat next to her. "That's so cool." She looked at Rianne curiously. "So. Why did he retire at the peak of his career then. He wasn't injured, he still had plenty of years left in him. Why'd he just step down and leave the country?"

"Deanna!" Luella gasped, appalled that her friend could be so tactless. "Maybe Rianne doesn't want to talk about it!"

"What?" Deanna protested. "It's one of the great mysteries of modern Quidditch! Alfredo Stormosi had everything - fame, money, a glittering career, a wife and three kids, and then he just gave it all up and took the entire family off to America for the best part of ten years. And nowhere does it ever say why. I just wanted to know."

"Maybe it's personal," said Luella, still amazed that her friend could be so upfront.

"No, I don't mind," said Rianne with a sigh. "Had to come up sooner or later. Anyway, it's no great mystery, not really. My mum died suddenly, and Dad felt he just had to get away. That's all."

"Oh." Now that she'd heard the truth, Deanna rather wished she hadn't asked. "Right. Sorry. Er, forget I said anything."

"Nice one, Tyler," Marlie's voice cut across, tones as icy as the atmosphere was becoming. "Offend her from the start, why don't you?" She turned to Rianne with an ingratiating smile. "I am so sorry about her, she doesn't know when to shut up."

"Hey look, we do have something in common after all," Deanna noted. "There's a thing. Rianne, please ignore her. You don't want to hang around with her, she's annoying."

"What?" Marlie yelled, now really wound up. "Don't you even think about muscling in, I saw her first!"

Deanna bridled at this, and it looked as if another round of squabbling was about to break out. Luella could stand it no longer. Rianne was giving her a pained look, and the last thing Luella wanted was to have her new friendship wrecked by all the bickering.

"When you've all quite finished," she snapped, leaping to her feet, an anger-fuelled power and confidence she hadn't known she'd possessed filling her, "I think you'll both find that *I* was here before either of you. I was making friends with Rianne before I even knew who her father was, not that his name really means anything to me

anyway. And I will not have you two fighting over her just because you want to be friends with a celebrity's daughter. You befriend her for herself or you back off. Have you both got that?"

The effect was immediate. Both Deanna and Marlie promptly shut up, staring at her in awe. Luella could have sworn she heard Marlie squeak, but apart from that, all was silence. Both nodded, mute.

"Good." Luella sat down again, shaking at what she'd just done. Had she really told her best friend and a girl who knew her darkest secret and who was so far less than trustworthy to sit down and shut up? And, more amazing still, had they really done just that? It appeared so. Deciding to make the most of it, Luella set about enforcing a temporary truce.

"Then let's pass this journey in peace, shall we? Let's be civil, polite and non-violent, at least until we get there. And if there is any more arguing, Rianne and I shall throw you both out and enjoy a compartment to ourselves. Is that quite clear?"

It was. Deanna and Marlie both agreed, and peace of a kind reigned. While neither of the two bitter enemies were talking, at least they weren't arguing. Both had reached into the trunks that had magically appeared in the compartment with them, and were now engrossed in books, Deanna in a book on kickboxing techniques and Marlie in something which looked oddly like an electronics manual. Strange, Luella had never had her down as the technical type. It just went to show.

"Impressive," Rianne murmured. "Remind me never to upset you - you've got quite a natural authority thing going there."

"I'm not normally like that," Luella whispered back. "It's just... they were getting to me, you know?"

"Hey, don't apologise!" Rianne grinned. "We've got eight hours with them at least, and you've just ensured a peaceful journey. Nice one!"

"Thanks!" Luella smiled. Whatever lay in wait for her at journey's end, the journey itself looked set to be a good one.

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Finally, they arrived at their destination, the train pulling at a small station looking like something from *The Railway Children*. There was only one oddity, and that was that despite the smallness of the station buildings, the actual platform seemed disproportionately long. She was soon to find out why, as the train came to a halt, and nearly three hundred students poured out of every available door. Separated from her friends in the rush, Luella found herself pushed by the crowd, and decided it was best to allow herself to be taken where they led. After all, they were all going to the same place eventually.

The crowd began to disperse as it left the station. A gruff voice rang out over the throng of students, calling out "Firs' years this way! All firs' years over 'ere!"

Luella fought her way through the crowd, which had by now thinned into groups of students chatting to each other. In the direction of the voice, she was met with an amazing sight. Towering above everyone else, looking especially large next to the first years surrounding him, was a giant of a man, with black bushy hair and beard, and fierce but gentle eyes.

"Gather roun', firs' years! Come here, kids!" he was calling, over the heads of the students, most of whom ignored him and passed by. Luella went over to him, and joined Deanna, Marlie and Rianne who were huddled together in a small group. Marlie shrieked suddenly, as one of the red-haired twins dropped something down her back.

"You bastards!" she squealed. "You wait until we get to school, Fred and George Weasley, I'll have both of you!" She danced about, contorting herself, while Rianne helped retrieve the live newt that the boy had thrown down there.

"Git," Marlie snarled. "He's one of the Weasley twins, you want to watch out for them. Real little troublemakers. They're our neighbours, and our dads are friends. The amount of trouble I've had from them all my life, they seem to take a personal delight in making my life hell."

"Who's he?" Luella asked, indicating the giant man.

Rianne answered her. "I'm not certain about this, but I think that might be Hagrid."

Luella was about to ask who Hagrid was, when the man himself cleared his throat, surveyed the scene and apparently decided that everyone who was going to turn up had done.

"Right! Now yeh're all 'ere, let me introduce meself. I'm Rubeus Hagrid, Hogwarts gamekeeper, altho' most folks just call me Hagrid. It's my job ter take yeh all ter Hogwarts. Follow me, you lot." And with that, he led the way, with the first years in his wake.

They turned a corner, and were met with an awesome sight. The path led sharply downhill towards a lake, which was sparkling in the twilight. Even more impressive, however, was the castle on the other side of the lake, silhouetted by the setting sun. It was a beautiful sight.

Luella heard Deanna catch her breath. On the other side of her, she heard Marlie whisper "Hogwarts!"

Hagrid flung out his arm to encompass the scene before them. "There yeh go, children! Hogwarts Castle is before yeh. I'd make a speech or summat, but I think I'll let the view speak fer itself."

They gazed at it for a long while, before Hagrid broke the spell and led them to the shore. There was a small wooden jetty by the lakeside, and bobbing up and down at the end was a small rowing boat.

Deanna looked at it, dismayed. "That little thing's not going to carry us all over, is it? We'll be here all night!"

Hagrid heard her. "Don't yeh worry, miss!" he said heartily. "We'll all be there in time for the feast!"

He began organising the students. Each boat could safely carry four children, so everyone started forming groups. Luella decided to remain with Deanna and company. The first boatload departed and a second boat suddenly rose up out of the water, much to Deanna's relief and Luella's amazement.

"Won't it be all wet inside?" she asked, worried.

Rianne snorted with laughter, Deanna shook her head, grinning, while Marlie gave her a slightly patronising look. Luella felt her face go red. It looked like she had a lot to get used to.

Their turn came, and the four of them clambered into a boat. Deanna was too enthralled to be nasty to anyone, and was just gazing at the stars. Marlie was looking back, at the small village of Hogsmeade glimmering in the darkness. Rianne, however, had her eyes fixed solely on Hogwarts. She had an odd expression on her face, a strange half-smile. Almost like she was coming home.

The voyage passed in a strange silence. Everyone in the other boats was similarly awestruck. It was almost a disappointment when the boat fetched up on the shore and they had to clamber out. The boats drifted under an old stone archway and into a small underground harbour. Luella scrambled out of the boat and waited with the others.

It took some time for everyone to arrive. Hagrid stepped out of the last boat, along with two very nervous first years who had been in the boat with him. The boat had been riding very low in the water at some points, and now it proceeded to sink even lower as the boats returned to wherever they had come from. Hagrid looked around, checked that everyone was OK, and walked on.

They followed him up a winding, spiral staircase. Marlie whimpered slightly and hugged the cave wall. There was a large drop on the other side and no handrail. Luella shared Marlie's evident fear of heights and desperately tried to avoid looking in that direction, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the back of Hagrid's head.

Eventually, they passed through a doorway and into what was clearly the Entrance Hall. Huddled together in a large group, they gazed around at the carved stonework and various statues of famous witches and wizards of the past. Then came a clear, sharp, woman's voice ringing out across the hall.

"Thank you, Hagrid, I will take them from here. You may go now." The speaker was a middle-aged sharp-faced woman Luella recognised instantly as Professor McGonagall. Hagrid bowed and headed towards another set of doors leading to a crowded, noisy room which must be the Great Hall. Evidently there was some kind of feast to mark the start of term.

Professor McGonagall led them into a small side room. Everyone crowded in and watched her, silent.

"Welcome, children, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At present, the rest of the school is at the inaugural feast to mark the beginning of term. However, before the feast can begin, there is a very important ceremony to be carried out. That ceremony, as I'm sure those of you with siblings already at Hogwarts will know, is the Sorting Ceremony."

A ripple of comment went through the crowd at these words. Luella felt her blood run cold at the thought of it, and looked at Deanna for reassurance. Deanna looked back at her, smiled, and gripped her hand tightly. She leaned over and whispered, "Lu, whatever happens, we'll face it together, OK? You'll always have my support." Luella nodded weakly, and turned her attention back to Professor McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall continued "The Sorting Ceremony is, some would say, the most crucial part of your time at Hogwarts. It is this ceremony that decides what house you will be in, and this, more than anything else, can play the biggest part in how your career at Hogwarts develops. Your house is like your family at Hogwarts. You will share a dormitory with others in your house, attend classes in your houses, spend your spare time in your house common room accessible only to other members of your house, eat your meals in your houses, and support your house Quidditch team. Your closest friends at Hogwarts are likely to be from your own house. In short, the house you are in is quite important. Each has its own character and history, and looks for different things in its members. Each has produced excellent witches and wizards, so do not think your capacity for achievement is limited by your house. Hogwarts has opportunities for all its students to excel. The four houses, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin, compete annually for the House Cup and winning it is a great honour for your house. Your successes will earn your house points towards the trophy, while rulebreaking will lose points. I hope all of you will contribute to the reputation of whichever house becomes yours."

Professor McGonagall regarded them critically. "I need to make preparations before the Ceremony can begin. You will wait here for now. I shall return when we are ready for you." She left the room without another word, closing the door behind her.

Immediately, the entire room burst out into conversation, most of it concerning what the Sorting Ceremony might involve, and what houses they'd end up in.

Marlie appeared to have few worries about the forthcoming ceremony.

"Well, Michael reckoned it was really painful and humiliating, but he doesn't seem to be too traumatised and he's a big wuss when it comes to pain. I'm more concerned about what house I'm in."

"You wanted to be a Slytherin, didn't you?" Luella recalled the day they first met in Diagon Alley.

Marlie sniffed a bit. "Well, as long as I'm not in the same house as those two", here she indicated the Weasley twins who were busy terrorising one boy by pretending to

swallow his toad, "I really don't care." Clearly the newt incident had not been forgotten.

It was at that moment that Professor McGonagall returned. "Alright, if you can all stop talking, it's time. Follow me." She led the way out, across the Entrance Hall and into the Great Hall.

The Great Hall fell silent as they entered. It was dominated by four long tables at which the rest of the school were seated. There were a fair few spaces around, which Luella guessed must be for them. As all the students at each table had the same colour sash, there was evidently one for each house. At the far end was another table, which appeared to be for the teachers. Luella, however, was distracted by Deanna grabbing her elbow and pointing at the ceiling. Looking up, her jaw dropped.

Where a ceiling should have been, there was only sky. Above her was a deep blue night sky with stars scattered across it.

"It's enchanted," Deanna whispered. "Made to look like the real sky! Great, isn't it?"

Luella just nodded. She was painfully aware of how quiet it was in here. McGonagall led them to the front of the hall in front of the teachers' table, where they lined up facing the school. Luella felt the whole school's eyes on her and began to go weak at the knees. Had anyone ever collapsed in fright during the Sorting? She had a nasty feeling she might be the first.

The room seemed to go quiet. Everyone's attention was drawn to a small three-legged stool in between the middle two tables, just before the line of apprehensive first-years. On it was a very old, very shabby, blue star-spangled pointy hat. Luella was wondering what possible use it could be, when, giving her the fright of her life, a mouth opened up above the rim and it began to sing.

*"A thousand merry years ago,
When the moon was full and round,
Four great and mighty mages
Sought a hallowed ground.
Fair Hogwarts Castle was the place
Where their endeavour received full grace.
To educate the mages' young
In magic, potions, charms and song
Was the task of the Hogwarts Four;
Their like will be seen never more.
Each chose from the black-clad youthful throng
The students to which their hearts would belong,
Until one day as they all grew old,
A new way was sought of dividing the fold.
And so it was that I was instated
To choose the students that were related.
Whoever wears me and opens her mind,
Will her Hogwarts family find.
Will you be a Gryffindor, brave and true?"*

*Those hardy folk never fear to lose.
Or will it be Hufflepuff, patient and kind?
Friends these people always will find.
Maybe Ravenclaw, keepers of knowledge;
Their brains and learning are the pride of this college.
Then there is Slytherin, cunning and secret;
When these folk want something, they move mountains to seek it.
Whichever group calls you to its bosom,
I wish you the best in the house you have chosen.
And whatever path takes you through school and beyond,
May you always have memories of which you'll be fond!"*

Applause greeted the end of the song. Luella heard some of the teachers behind her commenting on the quality.

"Very good sense of meter and rhyme."

"If you discount the beginning, yes. It left much to be desired; I've come to expect better. However, I must applaud the house descriptions, best I've heard in a long time."

The hubbub died away, as Professor McGonagall began to speak again. She was giving them instructions.

"Before you lies the Sorting Stool, and on it, the Sorting Hat. When your name is called, you will go to the stool, remove your own hat, sit down and place the Sorting Hat on your head. The Hat will then determine your house. Once it has done so, remove the Hat and leave it on the stool for the next child. Then take your seat at the appropriate house table. Are there any questions?" There were none, although most of the first years were looking highly relieved that all they had to do was put a hat on. Professor McGonagall began to read out their names from a scroll, starting with "Aherne, Kevin". Kevin Aherne walked slowly over to the hat and put it on, shaking. After a few minutes, the hat announced "HUFFLEPUFF!" Kevin took the hat off, flushed and happy as he made his way to the cheering Hufflepuffs, very pleased at having got the first Sortee of the year.

The first Sorting out of the way, the other first years seemed to cheer up. Astel, Jessica ("RAVENCLAW!"), Bell, Katie ("GRYFFINDOR!"), Bryant, Christopher ("SLYTHERIN!") and Chang, Cho ("RAVENCLAW!") all followed fairly quickly. Then came "Foxworth, Geoffrey" ("SLYTHERIN!"), who was given a hearty welcome by the boy sat opposite Kat Stormosi. More were sorted, and then Luella began to worry. Johnson, Angelina, and Jordan, Lee went to Gryffindor, and Levant, Jessamyn ended up in Ravenclaw. Then it was the turn of Lovegood, Marlene.

Rianne gave Marlie a pat on the back, whispering "Good Luck!" Luella could only manage a weak smile while Deanna remained impassive. Marlie walked determinedly to the stool, whisked off her hat, spun round and sat down. Then, with gritted teeth, she took a deep breath and put the Sorting Hat on.

The hall went quiet. Luella glanced at the Slytherin table and noticed Mike Lovegood and a red-haired girl who looked remarkably like Rianne looking at Marlie anxiously. They need not have worried. The Hat had barely touched her head before screaming "SLYTHERIN!" The Slytherin table went mad and Mike hugged his friend excitedly. Marlie pulled the Hat off, and grinned at Luella, her face flushed and smiling madly, her sash and hatband magically changing to Slytherin's silver and green stripes. She put the Hat down, and scampered off to join her brother, who hugged her and told his neighbours to make room. Luella's sick feeling eased a little. At least one of them had got the house she wanted.

Lundy, William was sorted into Hufflepuff, while Lynch, Alexander, found his way into Slytherin. And then it was her turn.

"Martin, Luella", Professor McGonagall's voice rang out. Shaking, Luella stepped forward, barely noticing Deanna patting her on the back and whispering "Go, Lu!", and Rianne clutching her hand in solidarity. She pulled her hat off and walked towards the stool. What had seemed a distance of only a few metres before now seemed to take forever. The hall had gone quiet. She finally reached the stool and sat down, picking up the Sorting Hat. She took one last look towards the teachers' table and met Deanna's eyes. Deanna winked back at her. Luella smiled and prepared to put the Hat on. It was then she noticed the teacher sitting behind where she had been standing. He was staring at her intently, a look of fierce concentration on his face. There was no doubting who he was. It was Professor Snape, in the flesh. Hastily, just to avoid that gaze, she pulled the Hat on.

Immediately, the world went dark and silent. The Hat was much too big for her and covered her eyes completely. She waited, expectantly. Nerves drained away and she now felt curious. Where would the Hat put her?

A little voice suddenly started speaking in her ear, causing her to start.

"Well, now, where shall you go? Not Hufflepuff, I think. There's a definite need to be noticed here, you'd be bored with the Huffs. You're a tough lady, no doubt about that, but a bit too self-centred to be a good Gryffindor. You're definitely smart enough for Ravenclaw, but on the other hand, there's a lust for power and a deviousness that's pure Slytherin. So where shall you go? Slytherin or Ravenclaw?"

Luella entertained the thought of being in Ravenclaw, of studying hard, being top of every subject, the most talented and powerful witch in her year. Nice. Very nice. The idea of her house looking up to her smarts was highly appealing.

The Hat was speaking again. "No problem. The Verts-et-Argents it is. SLYTHERIN!" The last word was screamed to the entire hall. Luella took the hat off, stunned. Too late, she realised what she'd done. Presented with a vision of herself as the most intelligent witch in the year, she'd turned it into a fantasy of being the most respected and powerful one in the year. Which was far and away the product of a Slytherin mind. She looked down. Her sash and hatband were green and silver. No turning back now. For better or worse, she was Slytherin. Which meant she was now facing the prospect of a fight to the death with Lord Voldemort. Blinking, she looked at Deanna, and got up, leaving the Hat behind. Deanna looked resigned to fate, but the look in her

eyes was one of fellowship. As she passed her on the way to the Slytherin table, Deanna whispered to Luella "I'm right behind you, don't worry." Rianne shook her hand and whispered "Well done, mate! Save me a seat, won't you?" Luella grinned and headed for the Slytherin table. All down the table length, Slytherins were cheering her. She idly wondered what would happen if they knew she was the Redeemer. Then she put it out of her mind. Voldemort's closest supporters had also been Slytherins, and they'd be rather less thrilled. She took a seat opposite Marlie.

Nearby, the red-haired girl sitting next to Mike, who turned out to be Rianne's older sister Katrina, better known as Kat, immediately congratulated her. "Well done! And welcome to Slytherin!"

Mike Lovegood followed up with "Yeah, nice one. Here's to your future as a Slyth." They toasted her, as did the Slytherins on either side, who introduced themselves as Summer Montague, third year Chaser and Jordan Foxworth, fourth year Keeper. It seemed she'd landed straight in the Quidditch head section.

Marlie was watching her slyly. "Well, well. So you are a true Slytherin, then." Marlie's normal extrovert and talkative manner had gone, to reveal something far more typically Slytherin. Luella wasn't at all sure she like the look in her eyes.

"It would appear so," she said stiffly.

Marlie merely smiled. "Well, here's hoping you make the best of it. We are counting on you." She lifted her glass again. "Here's to you, Luella Martin. May you fulfil your potential as a Slytherin. If you need my help, I will give it."

Mike turned away from hailing the imminent arrival in Slytherin of "Montague, Winter", to look at his sister. "That was very profound, Marlie. Has the Sorting Hat leaked some Ravenclaw into your head?"

Marlie just laughed and said, "In this house of pure-bloods, she'll need all the support she can get."

Feeling no more cheered than before, Luella turned to watch the rest of the Sorting, and found herself once more making eye contact with Snape. This time he wasn't concentrating. Merely regarding her coolly, and seemingly sizing her up. He had exactly the same expression on his face that Marlie had. Then came the most bizarre thing of all. Snape smiled briefly at her, before turning his attention to the Sorting again. Luella shuddered. She'd only been a Slytherin five minutes and already her House Master had taken a suspiciously sudden interest in her. She might be Muggle-born, but she knew enough to know that when a Slytherin looked at you like that, it could only mean one thing: that they had plans for you. This was rarely a good sign. However, the smile had not been an unfriendly one. For a brief moment, he'd almost looked attractive, in a strangely familiar way.

The Sorting had now reached "Parker, Daniel" (Hufflepuff) and "Peterson, Clara" (Ravenclaw). Soon it would be Rianne's turn. Luella found herself wishing things would hurry up. She was missing Rianne's company already. Despite the cheery welcome, she was feeling alone and adrift in a house where everyone else seemed to

have relatives and connections. She missed Rianne's comforting presence, craved an anchor to stop her from getting lost beyond recovery. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be many names left now. "Sharpe, Robert" went to Ravenclaw and "Spinnet, Alicia" to Gryffindor, and then it was Rianne's turn.

"Stormosi, Rianne" took the long walk to the Hat, seeming fairly confident. But only on the surface. Inside, all she could feel was a storm of turmoil within. *Stay calm, Rianne*, she instructed herself. *You can do this. You'll be fine. What happens, happens.* So saying, she picked up the Hat, sat down and disappeared inside.

As the comforting darkness enveloped her, so Rianne felt her turmoil disappear. Whether it was an end, or merely the eye in the hurricane though, she could not say. She waited for something to happen.

"Well, well, well," came the voice of the Hat. Alone of all the new first years, Rianne was not surprised or startled. She'd expected this. "Miss Rianne Stormosi." There was a slightly mocking tone to the way it said her last name which she did not like. "Where shall I put you?"

Rianne sighed impatiently. Still, there was no choice except to go through this charade. *You know where I must be. You know it must be Slytherin.*

"Now why is that then?" the Hat asked curiously. Rianne fought the urge to destroy it.

It is my fate, you know that! Where I'm meant be. Besides, and here her thoughts turned to her newfound friend Luella, *I am needed there. She will need me, surely you can see that?*

"She has other allies," the Hat replied. "Besides, you of all people should know that her fate is not necessarily yours. Maybe you're not meant to have anything to do with her. In any case, she's not my concern. You are."

Don't give me that. I could feel it on the train. She and I are linked. She may not be your concern, but she is, and always will be, mine. Now put me in Slytherin, damn you!

"And that's your desire, is it? Your one heartfelt ambition?"

Unlike Luella, Rianne was too cynical to fall for that one. Summoning up a desire for wealth and power, determined not to have the Hat turn on her and announce that with loyalty like that she'd make a good Hufflepuff, she put all her cunning to use.

Among other things. Let's just say that friendship with the Slytherin Redeemer's a gateway to the rest.

It worked. She heard the Hat sigh with something akin to disgust and disappointment.

"If that's what you really want. I had hoped you liked the girl for her own sake, but I suppose blood will out in the end. SLYTHERIN!"

The table erupted as Rianne got up and slowly made her way over. She barely took in the cheering around her as she took a seat next to Luella. All she could think of were those parting words of the Hat. *Blood will out?*

All doubts vanished from her mind as she looked up into Luella's eyes. Rianne had never seen anyone look so relieved.

"You're here!" Luella gasped, clearly delighted.

"Guess so," Rianne replied, amused. "Looks like we're stuck with each other. You OK with that?" Luella nodded with a grin before flinging her arms around Rianne. Smiling, Rianne hugged her back, her doubts temporarily laid to rest. *See, Sorting Hat, she does need me. I was just doing what I had to.* All the same, the voice whispering at the back of her mind refused to go away...

The Sorting was nearly done, with only four students remaining, Deanna, the red haired Weasley twins, and another boy. The name "Tyler, Deanna", was read out, and the girl strutted forward.

Slytherin or bust then, Deanna thought to herself. Even though she'd not been unaware of Rianne and Luella hugging, and knew that whatever happened, Luella would have at least one person looking out for her, that didn't mean she didn't want to be there too. *Lu will need me*, she thought as she sat down. *After all, she'll need someone who knows...* With these thoughts, she sat down and disappeared under the hat.

"Ah yes, Miss Deanna Tyler, the young Tal-y-Rhys Heiress. Slytherin for you, I suppose?"

Yes please. Was it really this easy? Deanna could have danced in elation.

"Even though there's someone in your year likely to involve you in the most perilous escapade of your life? Are you sure you want to risk the future of your family like that?"

Deanna sighed. Apparently not.

Sorting Hat, unless I help her in this, my family has no future. Get on with it. Sort me. Slytherin. Now.

The Hat was not so easily swayed. Deanna could feel it poking through her head, searching for gods knew what. She waited, tapping her foot impatiently, willing it to get on with it.

"My, aren't we hasty?" the Hat purred. "Sit tight, I'm not done yet. Well now, Miss Tyler, we have a very interesting situation here. You are certainly a powerful young lady, and I can see you want to be the best at everything. But I can also see a certain deficiency in the cunning department. In fact, your favoured solution to solving problems is to beat them into submission. Not a particularly Slytherin way of thinking, is it?"

Deanna wasn't sure what to say to this. She listened in growing horror as the Hat continued.

"There's also a worryingly selfless streak in here, isn't there? You truly care about that young Muggle-born, don't you? I think you truly would give your life to save her. There is nothing you would not do, no one you would not fight, for the sake of someone you care about. Am I right?"

Deanna didn't answer. All she could think about was how she wasn't going to make it to Slytherin after all, how she'd let both Luella and her mother down. What use would she be in Gryffindor? Or worse, Hufflepuff?

"Yes, all in all, I think you're well suited for Gry-"

Hold. She wasn't sure what to say, but she knew she had to say something. In no way was she going to sit back and let the Hat separate her from her friend and charge.

Are there really no lengths to which I would not go?

The Hat paused. Once more, she could feel it rummaging through her mind. Then she felt it stop. It seemed to have hesitated. What had it found?

When the Hat next spoke, its voice had changed utterly. It sounded almost... shocked.

"You are right," it said slowly. "There are no lengths to which you will not go. SLYTHERIN!"

Deanna got up and made her way over. That had been a close one. Too close. She felt she should be disturbed by the Hat's words, but Caitlin Tyler's daughter had been taught too well for that. To live without fear, you needed to be strong, and if you wanted to survive, you had to be prepared to cross the line sometimes.

"Hey, my friends," she greeted the other three girls as she took a seat next to Luella. "I made it."

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Nothing of further note occurred during the Sorting. "Vetinari, Lucas" also ended up in Slytherin, while the Weasley twins found themselves in Gryffindor. And with that, the Sorting was over, the Feast got under way and the Hall descended into chatter.

"Well, that was i-i-interesting, wasn-n-n-n't it, S-s-s-severus?" Professor Quirrell's stammering voice cut into Professor Snape's concentration. What d-d-did y-y-you th-th-think of this year's n-n-new Slytherins?"

Snape did not answer at first, too lost in thought to notice. However, Quirrell's stammer had a way of getting to him and he finally snapped back at the younger professor.

"They'll do," he snapped, in a way that left no room for argument. Snape had long ago mastered the art of the closed answer, made vastly easier by his not really caring for the feelings of lesser mortals, which was pretty much everyone except for Dumbledore and Melissa Lovegood. Quirrell had long ago been assigned to the category of rank inferiors.

Quirrell was not to be put off. "W-w-w-what d-d-do you th-th-think of th-that new young M-m-m-muggle-born?" he asked.

Had Snape not had other things on his mind, he might have picked up on the odd gleam in Quirrell's eyes. However, he did not, and the look didn't come back to him until it was too late.

"I was paying rather more attention to young Miss Tyler," Snape said curtly. "It's the first time ever that I've seen the Hat stop mid-call, hesitate, then call out something else entirely."

"Nearly a G-g-gryffindor?" Quirrell asked wryly.

This time, Snape fixed Quirrell with his fiercest glare. Quirrell quailed in fear.

"I don't believe, Samael, that Miss Tyler's inner nature is any of your concern. She is Slytherin. That is enough." He got to his feet. "I have some research to do. I shall see you tomorrow at the staff meeting. Good evening." With that, he swept out.

So it was that no one noticed Professor Quirrell staring surreptitiously at Luella with a very strange look in his eyes indeed.

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Chapter Five: The Master of Potions

The first few days passed smoothly. The other Slytherins appeared to be friendly enough. No one had yet taunted Luella for being Muggle-born, nor had Deanna been picked on for being fatherless. Evidently, Debra, Kat and Mike were keeping their word and looking out for them. Anyone who fancied their chances on the Quidditch squad couldn't afford to annoy Kat or Mike, while Debra had the uncanny knack of silencing the entire Common Room with a single glance. It helped that Debra had, as rumoured, been made a prefect at the feast.

Sharing a dormitory with three other girls was proving somewhat fraught. Deanna and Marlene still spoke to each other only when they had to, which proved somewhat irritating for the dorm's other occupants. However, Rianne was perfectly friendly to them all, and Marlene was showing Luella no overt hostility. In fact, she was going out of her way to be helpful. Her motive for this was soon apparent, as Luella discovered after their first History of Magic lesson.

Marlene had gently guided Luella aside for a brief chat. Luella's suspicions were not assuaged by Marlene's apparently friendly manner.

"So you're a true Slytherin, then."

Luella sighed, her heart sinking. Best to adopt Deanna's approach, she decided.

"Obviously, or the Hat wouldn't have put me here. Your point being?"

Marlene just smiled mysteriously. "Interesting that you produce our house emblem the first time you even pick up a wand, then end up here."

Luella shrugged. "Obvious, I'd have thought. My subconscious wanted to be Slytherin so that's what came out the wand. What else could it be?" She was determined not to give anything away.

Again that same strange little smile from Marlene. "Is that what Mrs. Tyler told you? Oh well, then, if that's what she said... She knows more about these things than I do, I dare say."

Luella by this time was feeling quite uncomfortable. "Marlene, if there's something you want to tell me, then get on with it. You're beginning to freak me out."

Marlene shook her head. "Nothing of importance. Just that..." She leant closer and lowered her voice. "If you ever need my help, for any reason at all... I will give it. Promise."

Luella regarded her with suspicion. It was evident Marlene's mother had told her everything. But why? She wasn't so naive as to believe that Marlene was acting out of altruism here.

"Can I hold you to that?" she asked carefully.

"You have my word as a Slytherin. I swear it on the Great Serpent."

"The what?"

"Our house emblem." Marlene explained. "It's also our most sacred, unbreakable oath. It's said if you break an oath sworn on the Great Serpent, the Serpent itself will come for you."

"Scary."

"Too right, I hate snakes." Marlene shuddered, glancing nervously around as if she expected the Slytherin Serpent itself to be lurking around the corner.

"Pretty bad luck to get put in the Serpent House then, wasn't it?" Luella commented wryly.

"It was rather!" Marlie laughed. "Come on, it's Transfiguration next. I've been really looking forward to that one, I want to learn how to turn Mike into a frog."

Transfiguration proved to be something of a disappointment. Professor McGonagall began the lesson interestingly enough, with a speech on the glory of transforming.

"Welcome to Transfiguration. This is the class where you will eventually learn how to achieve that famous magical speciality of turning your fellow students into frogs."

Laughter followed this. It seemed many of the students had had the same idea as Marlene. The Weasley twins in particular had been talking earlier about their older brother Percy, and how they'd like to transfigure him into a particularly lowly specimen of pond fauna.

"Then drop him down the back of someone else's robes." Fred grinned at Marlie. Marlie said nothing, just turned away with her nose in the air.

Professor McGonagall continued, "However, that is a long way off, and I do not expect any of you to be learning that until you reach sixth year." A groan of disappointment spread across the classroom. The Weasleys in particular looked most fed up. Evidently Percy Weasley was safe for the time being. Luella heard George (or was it Fred?) muttering "Bloody hell, by the time we learn it, he'll have left."

"It is very advanced magic, and I do not believe any of you are capable of it just yet. It is best left until you are all much older. However, I have no doubt most of you will achieve it in time. Maybe some of you will even reach the pinnacle of Transfiguration and become Animages."

At this, Marlie's hand shot into the air. Professor McGonagall noticed her and said "Yes, Miss Lovegood?"

"Miss, what's an Animage?"

Professor McGonagall looked a little annoyed, but there was a certain amount of pleasure there that someone was taking an interest. "Well, I was going to leave this for the OWL syllabus, but I don't see why a brief introduction to Animagism is inappropriate. An Animage, Lovegood, is a witch or wizard who can transform themselves into an animal. This is an incredibly difficult and complicated piece of magic, taking years to learn and master effectively. A great deal of skill is involved and there is much potential for things to go wrong before it is mastered. The transformation itself, once mastered, however, can be performed without a wand and can be done at any time in any place. It is a very useful ability to have and has saved many lives. However, it has also proved very damaging for people who don't know they are dealing with Animages, so they all have to register with the Ministry, stating what animal they transform into and what its markings are. So no one can use Animagism to spy on others." Professor McGonagall said sternly, looking at the rows of disappointed students. Luella glanced at the Weasleys, who were clearly contemplating the possibilities of being able to transform into an animal.

Marlene looked fascinated. She raised her hand, intent on asking another question.

"Professor, how do you choose what animal you're going to be?"

"The short answer to that, Miss Lovegood, is that you don't. The animal chooses you. Or rather, the animal you become reflects your deepest inner nature. There are many stories of disappointed Animages who wanted to be a lion or a wolf, but ended up as spiders or leeches." The entire class sounded revolted.

Luella recalled reading her Hogwarts prospectus. Professor McGonagall had been described as a registered Animaga. Tentatively, she raised her hand. Professor McGonagall nodded in her direction.

"Professor, aren't you an Animaga? What do you transform into? If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind at all, Miss Martin. I usually save this for my OWL students, but if you all want to see my transformation..."

The class assented. Everyone was paying attention. Professor McGonagall stepped into full view, took a deep breath and transformed. The class gasped. Where Professor McGonagall had been was a small tabby cat with eye markings closely resembling Professor McGonagall's spectacles. Marlene looked awestruck. Some of the Gryffindor girls could be heard oohing and aahing, at least until the cat looked sternly at them. In a flash, the cat was Professor McGonagall again.

"Alright, enough of the demonstrations. Time for you lot to get some work done. Today we're trying a little basic Transfiguration to start you all off. You're going to be changing matches into pins. Everyone come and collect a match each. This is how it's done..." And with that, the lesson began.

Transfiguration was followed by a half hour break between classes. Taking advantage of the warm weather, the four Slytherins went for a walk in the grounds.

"Well, if this is magic school, I like it!" Luella was declaring. "OK, History of Magic is a complete waste of time, but Transfiguration wasn't too bad. My match was looking distinctly pointy by the end of it, don't you think?"

"Still a match though, wasn't it?" Deanna said sarcastically. "I nearly cut my finger on mine."

"Shame it was still wooden." Rianne said. "Mine was pretty much perfect, I think. Marlie, you did quite well too."

Marlene looked distracted. "Eh, what? Oh, pins. Bit dull though. I want to do something more impressive. I mean, why would anyone seriously want to turn matches into pins? Apart from Madam Malkin. I was more interested in Animagism. Did you see when she transformed?"

Luella grinned. "Pretty fantastic, wasn't it? Tell you what, we'll have to watch ourselves now. You never know if McGonagall might be around in her cat form. Least we know now."

"I guess that's why Animages have to register." Deanna said, "So they can't spy on people. Defeats the whole object if you ask me."

"But wouldn't it be cool to be able to do it though?" Marlene seemed lost in a world of her own. "Just being able to take on animal form whenever you want... I'm never missing a lesson now, I want to know how it's done!"

"Going to be an Animaga, are you?" Rianne asked. "Well, good luck. Let us know what you manage to turn into, I'd like to know if you're around."

"Long as you don't end up as a lizard or something. Or a cockroach." Deanna was sneering a little. The tone of her voice was not lost on Marlene.

"The only cockroaches you'll be seeing around me are the ones that were once people who annoyed me." Marlene responded tartly. "Trust me, there will come a time, Miss I'm-going-to-be-a-famous-Auror, when you will wish you could transform!"

Luella sensed a fight in waiting. Hastily changing the subject, she asked, "Anyone know what we've got next?"

Rianne rummaged in her bag for her timetable. "Charms with the Ravenclaws. Then lunch. After that," she paused suddenly. A pleased look crept onto her face. "Potions with the Gryffindors. We've got Snape."

Deanna grimaced. "Oh gods. Not him. He's a right git, from what I've heard."

Marlene nodded. "For once I agree with you. Mike's told me all about Snapey and he's an evil bastard from what I can tell. Apparently he's really easy on Slytherins though, so we're safe."

Rianne was looking rather shocked. "You shouldn't be saying things like that about him, he's a teacher! And our House Master, don't forget! We should show him respect."

Deanna and Marlene were giving her very strange looks indeed.

"Ri," Marlene said patiently, "I don't want to suggest that you're nuts or anything, but you have two older sisters, one of whom is the notoriously workshy Kat Stormosi. Surely they haven't put you off him by now?"

"You want to watch out there, Rianne." Deanna said, a gleam in her eyes. "You'll be turning into Debra next, the Head Girl in waiting. Honestly. Just because he's a teacher does not mean he's entitled to our respect. He'll have to work for mine."

Luella decided to defuse the situation. Rianne was looking distinctly edgy, and more than a bit annoyed.

"I think, Deanna, that Ri was just saying that since he's our House Master, it'd be good to get on the right side of him and not think of him as a second Voldemort or anything."

"DON'T SAY THE NAME!!!" Rianne and Marlie both screeched together.

"Honestly, Lu, you'll be the death of us one day." Rianne said uncomfortably. "No one says his name, no one. Except Professor Dumbledore. Saying the name might bring him back."

Deanna snorted. "As if. You wusses. Mum says his name. Reckons that naming something gives you power over it, and refusing to name anything gives it power over you."

Marlene did not look convinced. "Well, I'm not arguing with you, but I'm not saying it. I'd rather not think about him." She shook herself and glanced around nervously. "Come on, it's nearly time for Charms."

Charms passed uneventfully. Professor Flitwick started them off gently enough, with a simple Laughing Charm. Deanna proved to be rather good at it, leaving Luella laughing so hard she had to be taken to the hospital wing to calm down and was still chuckling to herself half an hour into lunch.

Any levity was immediately dispelled, however, by walking into Professor Snape's dungeon classroom. Dank, cold, gloomy and with cobwebs in the far corners, it was not an inviting place. The jars around the walls containing things best not described did not exactly incite a cheering atmosphere. All in all, Luella thought it was the best antidote to a Laughing Charm she'd ever seen.

Professor Snape himself was seated behind his desk, scowling at them all as they arrived. Even the Weasley twins looked a little nervous. Luella and Deanna took their seats in the corner furthest from Snape's desk, while Rianne and Marlie sat across the

aisle, on the same bench as the Weasleys. Marlene looked far from pleased to find herself next to Fred Weasley again, especially as there were so many slimy things in various states of aliveness that could be dropped down her robe. Luella could only hope that the presence of Professor Snape would deter the twins from trying anything.

Once everyone had settled down, Snape began to call out the register, starting with the Gryffindors. Most of them were evidently Muggle-born, as he made little comment on any of them, until he came to the Weasleys. He regarded them coldly.

"Ah yes, the infamous Weasley twins. I have heard much about you. Most of it unfavourable. I shall warn you both now, if there are any of your usual tricks in my classes, you will be most severely punished. Other teachers may regard your little pranks as amusing games to be tolerated, but I regard you both merely as arrogant rulebreakers. Be warned. I'm watching you."

The class was silent. Most of them were feeling just a little bit scared. The Slytherin boys were grinning at the Weasleys, clearly enjoying the sight of the two best known Gryffindor first years getting singled out so soon. The twins themselves however, seemed unmoved. In fact they were looking at each other in a way which clearly suggested that when they planned their next bout of rulebreaking, Snape was first in line. Luella didn't know whether to sympathise with them both, or start pitying Snape.

Snape began to call out Slytherin names. This took rather longer, mainly because he kept stopping to mention that he'd known their parents, or older siblings. "Ah, Miss Lovegood. The Dark Arts Destroyer's Daughter. And sister to our finest Beater. I'm told you have ambitions to be on our Quidditch team too. May you prove as worthy a flier as your brother. I knew your mother well too, if your mind is half as sharp as hers, you'll be top of the class in no time."

Marlene blushed slightly. Evidently she wasn't used to having her family achievements pointed out so publicly. The Gryffindors were glaring at her, with the Weasleys in particular giving her much the same look they'd been giving Snape earlier. Luella made a mental note to warn Marlene to watch her back, literally.

Alex Lynch had to go through something similar, as Snape commented on the Quidditch skills of his brother Aidan, last year's Slytherin Seeker who had evidently just graduated and gone on to play professionally.

Then it was Luella's turn. She didn't think Snape would dwell on her long. After all, she was just a Muggle-born, with no magical parents or sibs for him to compare her to. But she was wrong. Snape called her name, she answered, and their eyes met. For the longest time, they just looked at each other, saying nothing. Luella began to panic. What was the matter? Was Snape one of those wizards who despised Muggle-borns? Just as Luella began to fear the worst, Snape spoke.

"So you're Luella Martin. If what I have heard is true, we are to expect great things from you. I hope you will not disappoint." Then, just like at the Sorting Feast, he half-smiled at her in an unnerving yet strangely familiar manner for a fleeting moment. Then he moved on to Winter Montague, commending his Chaser sister Summer on her abilities and hoping Winter would one day equal them.

Rianne's turn involved her sisters being commended on their abilities as Prefect and Head Girl in waiting, and Chaser star. "Debra tells me you're more like her, so maybe you too will one day wear the silver badge for Slytherin. I am sure you are more than capable of achieving it." Rianne went bright red at this, but met Snape's eyes calmly. Almost as if she was silently promising Snape she'd do exactly that. Rather odd, Luella thought. While fully aware that Rianne was making up for lost time by reading every book she could get her hands on and being consistently brilliant at every class she attended, to see her give that much adoration to a teacher was quite frankly unusual. And while she'd said to Deanna that Rianne was probably just covering herself and smoothing her path to the top by getting her House Master onside, Rianne's Snape fixation seemed to go beyond that. Almost as if it was... genuine? Surely not. Maybe it was just determination to do well. Yeah, that'd be it. No one could fancy Snape, surely... Although, if he washed his hair, got some fashionable robes and generally sorted himself out looks wise, he'd look quite suave, in a Heathcliff-esque sort of way.

Luella was jerked out of her reverie by Deanna barely acknowledging her name. It was obvious that Deanna was no more impressed by her house master than the Weasleys had been. Yet Snape didn't seem to notice. In fact he was staring right at Deanna as if he'd seen a ghost. When he did speak, it was with difficulty.

"So you're Caitlin Tyler's daughter." he said, licking his lips nervously. Luella was surprised. Snape seemed the last person to be nervous merely encountering an old schoolfriend's child. Deanna merely nodded shortly. Snape continued.

"I knew your mother very well. I've not seen her in years. Is she still an Auror?"

Deanna had apparently decided to actually speak. "She is."

"Is she well?"

"She's doing fine."

Snape nodded. "Good, good. I must get in touch with her again some time, talk about old times. She's one of the few from that era that the Dark Lord didn't get hold of." With that, he seemed to recover himself and moved on to the last on the register, Lucas Vetinari, who turned out to be another Auror's child and sibling to a Quidditch star (his Chaser sister, Laetitia).

At last, the register was over, and the lesson began in earnest. Snape laid the register book aside and began pacing the floor.

"This, students, is Potions. Some of you may be under the impression that, merely because there is no waving of wands and no flashes of light or puffs of smoke, that this is not real magic. However, let me tell you, you could not be more wrong." He fixed them with his steely gaze. Luella felt nervous just looking at him, even from the back of the class. Not even Rianne was this scary.

"Potions is an intrinsically fascinating subject. The bubbling of liquids, the hiss of steam rising from the cauldron, the shimmering of the potion itself, the feeling of

satisfaction as your master work changes from mere ingredients into a true thing of power... nothing can better the feeling of satisfaction as you survey your finished creation and know that there is a job well done. Most branches of magic are a mere flash in the pan as you cast the spell then nothing. Potions, by contrast, is a work of art. I do not expect any of you to appreciate this, however. Most students' minds are too blunt to appreciate the subtleties of this subject. Maybe some of you may be blessed with enough sensitivity to penetrate the secrets of potions, and learn to distil wealth, glory or death, depending on your whim. Maybe... unless you intend to be one of the usual dunderheads I end up teaching."

Luella shot a glance across at Rianne. She was gazing at Snape with an expression on her face that could only be described as rapturous. Clearly she intended to uncover every secret that Potions had to teach her, and more.

Snape's little theatricality appeared to be over. He was now instructing them in the art of mixing up a Sleeping Potion, a nice easy one to get them started, so he claimed. Luella, frantically copying down the ingredients and recipe off the board as Snape wrote them up, thought it all sounded rather complicated.

Once the instructions had been copied down, the class set to work. Luella and Deanna began chopping up asphodel root. Deanna looked rather irritated.

"What's up, Dee?" Luella asked her, guessing what was on her mind.

"That idiot." Deanna snarled. "Listen to him! Going on about how special Potions is! What use is any of this likely to be when you're facing several armed Dark wizards? I can just see the Dark Lord waiting while you brew up a Potion of Instant Agonisingly Painful Death to finish him, can't you? 'Oh, excuse me, Lord Voldemort, I'll be with you in a moment, I just need a few minutes for the wormwood to marinade.' Honestly, potions are all very well, but you can't beat a good curse when your back's against the wall. That's the trouble with academics, no grasp of life in the real world. Just think if Mum or Auntie Mel were teaching here, they wouldn't have us wasting our time on subjects like this, they'd have us working on defending ourselves, proper magic."

A cold voice came from behind them. "Interesting to hear your ideas on the Hogwarts curriculum, Miss Tyler, but sadly you are in no position to implement any of them."

Deanna and Luella both started. Snape had been wandering around the class observing them at work and had halted behind their bench. He spoke softly, so none of the others paid them any attention. However, Luella could see that Rianne and Marlene were watching them, concerned. Deanna had gone pale and was now silent. Contemptuous of Snape she might be, but she had no desire to get expelled, and was not about to risk Snape's wrath. Snape continued speaking in the same soft, menacing tone.

"You will find, Deanna, that all subjects on the Hogwarts curriculum are worthwhile studies in their own right, not just Defence Against the Dark Arts. I would advise you to work hard at all of them, not just the ones you think are interesting. You never know what might come in useful. I would have thought your mother would have told

you that." There was a slightly mocking gleam in his eyes. Deanna looked furious, but was concentrating on slicing her belladonna leaves up. She did not meet Snape's eyes.

Snape opened his mouth as if to say something else, but was suddenly distracted by a shriek from across the aisle. Marlene had turned on Fred Weasley and was calling him all sorts of names as she ran her fingers frantically through her hair.

Snape immediately approached them, a look of cold anger on his face. "Miss Lovegood, control yourself. What exactly has Mr Frederick Weasley done to deserve your wrath?"

Marlene was beside herself with righteous outrage, but calmed down sufficiently to land Fred Weasley right in deep trouble.

"Sir, Weasley's been putting roaches in my hair!"

Snape regarded Fred as though he were little more than the roaches he'd tipped over the Slytherin. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley and a detention. Clear up the roaches, and get on with your work." Turning away from a seething Fred and a smug Marlene, who was even now poking her tongue out at the disgruntled Gryffindor, Snape returned his attention to Luella and Deanna. However, rather than giving any punishment out to either of them, he merely stooped close to Luella and murmured softly to her "Stay behind after the lesson. I want a word with you." before walking off to check that Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were brewing theirs correctly.

Deanna gazed after him, amazed at his attitude. "Who does he think he is? I was the one putting his subject down and he keeps you behind! What a bastard. I've half a mind to write to Mum and complain. And talking of Mum, fancy him saying that about her! Implying she hasn't taught me properly, what a nerve."

Luella said nothing. Experience had taught her that the best action in this situation was to stay quiet and let Deanna rant. Besides, she had things to think about. Snape had really intrigued her now. Why did he want to talk to her? He hadn't thought twice about giving instant punishment to Fred Weasley, so why would he have bothered to detain her? Anyway, Deanna had been the one complaining. Talking of Deanna, why had he been so nervous with her when calling her name out? And why Snape's interest in Deanna's mother? How well exactly had they known each other? Curiouser and curiouser. However, Luella was far more concerned with what Snape wanted from her. What did he know? Why did he expect great things? There was only thing he could possibly mean, but how in the world did he know about that? The only ones who knew were Mrs. Tyler, Mrs. Lovegood, Marlie, Deanna and herself. She hadn't said anything, Deanna surely hadn't, and Marlie had given an unbreakable oath. Snape had apparently not had contact with Mrs. Tyler for some time, and he was hardly likely to have heard anything from Mr. Ollivander, an ex-Ravenclaw by all accounts. Which just left Mrs. Lovegood. Who was apparently the most secretive Slytherin around, which said a lot. She'd hardly be likely to gossip, but on the other hand, she'd no doubt want some kind of spy at Hogwarts, and would probably want a teacher in addition to her own daughter keeping tabs on the situation. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. However, she had no intention of revealing anything about herself unless she had to. Who knew what Snape had in mind?

The lesson continued without further disturbance. Snape stopped them about ten minutes from the end to see how well they'd done, and picked Rianne to demonstrate hers. Fred Weasley was selected as a guineapig, something Luella thought was unlikely to be accidental. A look at Snape's twisted grin confirmed it. Sure enough Rianne's potion worked a treat and Fred was soon snoring contentedly.

"A pity we can't leave him like that." Snape commented waspishly. "He's so much less trouble when he's asleep. However, the inside of his mouth holds no immediate attractions and that snoring is frankly irritating. I pity those poor unfortunates who have to share a dormitory with him." Here he sneered at the Gryffindors. Picking up a small phial, he administered the antidote to him. Fred woke up immediately, and was sent back to his seat. Snape congratulated Rianne. "An excellent effort. Ten points for Slytherin for a perfect Sleeping Potion. I hope the rest of you will take Miss Stormosi's work as a shining example of how a potion should be made."

Rianne returned to her seat glowing with pride, oblivious to the looks of hate the Gryffindors were giving her. "Did you hear that?" she whispered to Luella, Deanna and Marlene. "A shining example, he called me! And I got my first points for Slytherin! I'm so happy!"

Not even Deanna could find it in her to be too sarcastic; after all Rianne had just won them ten points. However, she couldn't refrain from commenting on how Snape appeared to have taken rather a shine to the youngest Stormosi.

Rianne blushed at this. "Do you really think s- I mean," she coughed, quickly composing herself, "I'm sure he's just pleased to see someone who likes potions for once. Poor fellow, must be awful having all his students preferring 'proper magic' involving explosions." She gave Deanna a stern look which indicated that she had heard every word of her little rant earlier. Deanna flushed at this, but did not respond. She knew better than to annoy a member of the infamous Stormosi clan.

The bell now sounded for the end of the lesson. The rest of the class were packing up and leaving. Snape was talking to Fred Weasley, who was looking annoyed. Clearly he was having his detention arranged. Deanna whispered "Good luck" to Luella before following the rest of the class out. Fred walked off sulking, which just left Snape and Luella alone in the class. Swallowing nervously, she approached her house master.

"You wanted to talk to me, Professor?"

To her surprise, Snape, far from being angry, actually smiled gently at her and told her to sit down at the desk nearest him.

"Don't look so concerned, Miss Martin. I merely wished to ask how you were settling in at Hogwarts."

Surprised, and more than a little suspicious at Snape's apparent concern, Luella replied, "Fine. I mean, lessons are proving OK, I've made friends with the other Slytherin girls in my year, and everyone's been nice to me so far. I like it here."

Snape nodded, thoughtfully. "Good, glad to hear it. I did have my doubts about you, but if all is well..."

Luella began to feel uneasy. "Professor, was there something else you wanted to tell me?"

Snape appeared unruffled. "I gather Professor McGonagall informed you that your house serves as your Hogwarts family? She usually says something of that nature to new students." Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Well, inter-house relations", here he grimaced painfully, "mean that Slytherin has had to be a closer-knit 'family' than most. I pride myself on leading a united house. As you are no doubt aware, I am head of Slytherin House, and that places me in the role of 'father' to all Slytherins here. I take that role seriously. And I just wanted to let you know that if you experience any problems here, if anything happens and you need assistance or just someone to talk to, I am here to help you as best I can. Do you understand me?" He was looking at her intently. His dark eyes were no longer cold, but strangely intense.

Luella understood him well enough, but this apparent concern worried her. Her Slytherin instincts were screaming at her to beware. She really wished that she'd bought a pocket Sneakoscope as well. Mustering up her courage, she looked back at him as calmly as possible.

"I think I understand you. But..." She paused, unsure what to say.

"Yes?" Snape pushed gently.

"Well, why are you telling me this? Why me, and not the other Slytherins?" Luella was feeling very uncomfortable about this. "Aren't you their house master too?"

Snape looked at her with a slightly patronising air. "I would have thought that was obvious."

Luella decided to play dumb. If he wanted trust he'd have to work for it. "Not really, sir."

Snape sighed. "Evidently you've not been told. In which case..." He looked uncertain, then seemed to come to a decision. "Miss Martin, think about your house mates. All of them seem to have noteworthy parents and siblings. Lucas Vetinari, son of esteemed Auror Marcus Vetinari and brother to current Slytherin Chaser Laetitia. Alexander Lynch, son of another Auror Carmela, with a brother who now plays professional Quidditch. Rianne Stormosi, with two well-known sisters here and parents who both excelled while they were students. Her mother's family are an ancient Welsh mage clan who were leading lights in Les Verts-et-Argents, her father's ancestors were powerful Roman magicians. Marlene Lovegood's antecedents are no less ancient, her maternal grandfather belonged to a leading magical family. Her mother is one of the Ministry's rising stars, and certainly the most competent one there, while her brother looks set to play Quidditch for England one of these days. Your own best friend is a child of a very talented and daring Auror who was a leading fighter against Voldemor- sorry, He Who Must Not Be Named,"

"I don't mind hearing the name. Voldemort." Luella said defiantly. After all, one day she'd have to fight the man, and she wanted the edge. Deanna's words earlier had hit a chord.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You surprise me. Few eleven year olds can bear to hear the name of one so feared. Very well. Deanna's mother was a leading fighter against Voldemort and a member of a highly prominent magical family. Virtually every single one of your housemates has a magical pedigree second to none. You, however..." He cleared his throat. "You are Muggle-born in a house consisting mostly of pure or at least half blood mages. While I personally have no problem with Muggle-borns, you should be aware that others are not so generous. Particularly in Slytherin House, there are those who regard Muggle-borns as being inferior. So far it appears you have not run across this regrettable and divisive prejudice. Evidently, Debra Stormosi is looking out for you. You are fortunate in your choice of friends, Miss Martin."

Luella merely nodded. "Thank you, sir. But I know all this, Mrs. Tyler told me before I came here."

Snape looked surprised at this. "You know her?"

"Yes, she lives opposite my house. Deanna and I have known each other for years, that's why we're best friends now."

Snape seemed positively delighted by this news. "Excellent!" He laughed, stroking his chin. "Fortuitous for us all, to have you living so close to one of the Ministry's best Aurors." He seemed to suddenly realise he was saying more than he should and changed the subject. "But I digress. As I was saying, Muggle-born mages are unfortunately looked down on by certain sectors of our society, and Slytherin is sadly not empty of these types. However, I have no wish to see this divide my house. I've spent far too much time trying to raise Slytherin's profile to see it torn apart by petty and unfounded bigotry. I therefore want you to know that if you are ever the victim of this prejudice, or have any other problems, you can rest assured that I will do all in my power to deal with the offenders. I have my own reasons for wanting to see you succeed at Hogwarts."

"And they are...?" Luella's suspicions had not been allayed one iota.

Snape smiled enigmatically. "My reasons are my own, Luella Martin. I will tell you all in good time. If Caitlin has already told you, then I think we both know what we are talking about. If not, you don't need to know yet. Let's just say that you interest me greatly. I look forward to seeing you develop at Hogwarts." With that, he got up. The conversation was clearly at an end. Luella found herself shown to the door firmly but politely. Snape bowed slightly as she left and wished her good day, before closing the door behind her.

Deanna, Marlene and Rianne were waiting for her in the corridor. Marlene rushed forward immediately.

"Deanna told us what happened! Are you OK? What did he say to you? You're not in trouble are you?"

"No, I'm not in trouble. He just wanted to know how I was settling in and if I had any problems to come to him."

Deanna raised her eyebrow. "Most charitable. What's he planning for you? He's obviously trying to lull you into a false sense of security before pouncing. Maybe he has illicit designs on you."

Marlene choked with laughter. Luella felt herself go red. "Dee! I'm eleven, what kind of pervert do you think he is?"

Deanna just looked at her, clearly indicating that she would put nothing past Professor Snape.

Rianne looked furious. "Deanna, how dare you? Casting aspersions on him like that. I'm sure Professor Snape's just concerned for her wellbeing."

"You are very naive sometimes, Rianne. No one, especially not Professor Snape, takes an interest in their students for no reason." Deanna looked thoughtful. "Why did he want to tell you that, anyway?"

Luella wondered whether to tell Deanna all her suspicions, but decided against it with Rianne and Marlie there.

"Just that I'm Muggle-born, and he wanted to know if any of the other Slytherins ever used it against me. I think he thinks that I might get picked on."

Marlene smiled. "No worries there. Mike won't put up with that sort of rubbish and anyone who has any Quidditch ambitions will not want to alienate him. And would you want to pick a fight with him? By the time he graduates, you'll be in sixth year and hopefully will have enough personal power to silence any critics. Worry not, Lu."

Rianne looked like she was thinking. "But Chris Bryant's Muggle-born too, why didn't Snape want to talk to him? And he's not got anything like the connections Lu has. Although I think he's mates with Geoff Foxworth, so maybe he's safe after all. Plus I think Snape thinks the boys can look after themselves."

Deanna exploded. "So he's not just an arrogant git, he's sexist as well! Typical bloody male. Well, we'll show him, won't we? We'll show him Lu can look after herself without needing him!" She thumped Luella on the back. Luella grinned weakly. She really hoped Deanna wasn't going to make a habit of antagonising the Potions master. If, as seemed to be the case, Snape knew about her, she really didn't want to give him a reason to go running straight to Voldemort with that information. She still didn't know if she could trust him. He was, after all, Slytherin. However, she was also equally sure that Mrs. Tyler wouldn't have befriended anyone who was dangerous, and certain that Mrs. Lovegood would not have entrusted her secret to anyone untrustworthy. Frowning, she followed the others back to the common room.

Chapter Six: Quarrels Over Quidditch

It was later that evening before Luella managed to talk to Deanna on her own. The Slytherin common room, referred to as the Serpent's Nest, or simply the Nest, by its residents, was its usual hive of activity. Chris Bryant was attempting to set up his stereo system so he could demonstrate to a curious Geoff Foxworth and Alex Lynch what Muggle rock music sounded like. The rest of the first year were also gathered round, as well as a few older Slytherins who seemed strangely expectant about something in a not particularly nice sort of way.

"Wait till you hear this, lads, you'll love it! Def Leppard are excellent!" Chris was enthusing to them.

"This had better be worth hearing, Chris, after all you've told us." Lucas remarked casually.

Alex was grinning. "Yeah, ever since we got here, it's been Leps this and Leps that. If they're rubbish, you're in for a fight."

"They are rubbish." Deanna pointed out. "Typical bloke music. Give me Madonna or Paula Abdul any day."

"Paula Abdul!" Chris sneered. "Honestly, girls! Now where's the power socket."

"Power socket!" Now it was Deanna's turn to sneer. "No electricity, dummy! This is Hogwarts, everything runs off magic!"

Chris shrugged. "No biggie. I got my Walkman." He rushed off back to his dormitory, leaving several young Slytherins wondering what on earth a Walkman was, how it fitted into a trunk, and if it could do your homework for you. Marlene now had a fiendish grin on her face.

"This should be interesting." she murmured quietly to the other girls. "He's obviously not done much research yet. You can tell he's Muggle-born. No offence, Lu." she added hastily.

"None taken if you explain what you're on about." Luella said, puzzled.

Marlene smiled enigmatically. "You'll see." she said quietly, running a hairbrush over a purring Snowy. Deanna moved away, scowling, not wanting white cat hair all over her nice black robes.

Chris returned carrying a Walkman and some plug-in speakers.

"Is that it?" Winter shouted. "It's tiny!"

Alex just looked confused. "Where's the legs? How can it walk with no legs?"

Geoff looked smugly at it. "Obvious, isn't it? It's like a tortoise, the legs are inside."

Marlene just rolled her eyes and looked at Luella. Clearly she knew exactly what a Walkman was.

Chris was berating his mage-born housemates. "It doesn't walk, you do the walking and carry it with you! It lets you listen to music on the move!"

"Oooh!" The Slytherin boys were impressed. Rianne glanced over from behind her Potions textbook. She was curious but trying not to show it.

Chris was setting it up. "Now, you attach the speakers like so... that's where the noise comes out of. Then the tape goes in here, like this. Then you press 'Play' and you get..."

They got a piercing wail that sounded like a cat being tortured, before the machine went dead. Snowy hissed at it before running away towards the girls' dormitories. Sooty, rather more laidback, just turned over and remained asleep, as did most of the other Slytherin cats.

Chris turned it off in disbelief. "What's wrong with it? It's not meant to do that!"

Lucas was most unimpressed. "Well, if that's what Muggle music sounds like, you can keep it. I've got Charms homework to do." The crowd of first years dispersed, seemingly agreeing with him. The older Slytherins were chuckling to themselves and getting on with homework.

Marlene was laughing out loud. "Typical Muggle-borns! Don't you know anything? Muggle technology doesn't work at Hogwarts, the magical field shorts everything out! You've probably just ruined your Walkman there."

"Noooo!" Chris howled. "My beautiful Walkman! My 'Hysteria' tape! I won't be able to hear it until Christmas now!"

Deanna appeared to start. "You mean that wasn't Def Leppard? I thought they were meant to sound like banshees wailing and machinery breaking down." Chris glared at her.

Marlene, once having overcome her initial amusement, was rather sympathetic.

"Don't worry, mate. I'll see if I can't sort out something for you. Let me look at your Walkman, it might not be that badly damaged. I'll owl it to my dad, he's a Muggle engineer. He might be able to fix it. And I might be able to find a way of playing Muggle tapes here. It can be my project this year." With that, she led Chris into a corner and began going over his Walkman. Luella, seeing Marlene thus occupied and Rianne engrossed in her homework, motioned Deanna to one side and led her up to their dorm, where they could get some privacy.

"What's up, Lu? Want to see if your Walkman's OK?" Deanna was grinning. "Told you not to bother bringing it, didn't I?"

Luella closed the door after checking no one was lurking in the corridor. "Nothing to do with Muggle toys. Snape. He knows, Dee."

Deanna was immediately on guard. "Knows what?"

"About me. He knows I'm the Redeemer."

Deanna was stunned. "How? There was only six of us there that day! I doubt it was Mum, she's not been in contact to my knowledge, it wasn't me, wasn't you, Ollivander's a Ravenclaw so wouldn't know the legend, which just leaves..." She stopped. Her face went cold.

"Marlie. It was her, must have been! Little sneak, I'll bloody kill her." She turned to the door, furious.

"Deanna, wait!" Deanna hesitated. Luella was determined not to let this get out of hand.

"Deanna, it couldn't have been Marlie, she's not had time! When has she been out of our sight since she got here? Tonight's probably the first time she's not been with one of us. It was probably her mother. You know what Mrs. Lovegood is like, she trusts no one and has to know everything that's going on. She's probably enlisted Snape to keep tabs on us."

Deanna laughed shortly. "Auntie Mel trusts Snape? She's more naive than I thought then. Or she's losing her touch. If anyone here's an ex-Death Eater, it's ol' Snape-eyes."

Luella felt uncomfortable. Deanna was absolutely right, if anyone looked the Death Eater type, it was Snape. And yet, would Mrs. Lovegood really have enlisted the aid of a Death Eater? She told Deanna this.

Deanna shrugged. "OK. Be naive if you want to. But I'm carrying my Sneakoscope with me from now on."

The following morning was a fine breezy September day, perfect for their first lesson of the day, which turned out to be Flying with Madam Hooch and the Gryffindors.

Marlene was really excited. "I've been really looking forward to Flying! Almost as much as Transfiguration. I need to do well if I want to be on the house Quidditch team. I bet I'm really good, though. Mike and I are always playing it at home. My broom's a Cleansweep Six, it's really fast. Can't wait until I get on the team and can have it owled over."

Rianne was more laidback about it. "Flying's alright, but really overrated. I mean, Quidditch is about all you really use a broom for, isn't it? I'm looking forward to our last year when we get to learn how to Apparate."

Deanna hung behind with Luella, listening to them argue. She was most unimpressed.

"Listen to her, the annoying little snob. I bet she's never flown before in her life. I mean, I wouldn't mind being on the house team, but at least I'm not flaunting it. She's going to make enemies like that."

"What, like you, you mean?" Luella was beginning to get a little bit tired of Deanna complaining all the time about Marlene. "You should be grateful, you owe her a favour."

"Do I now." Deanna was sceptical.

"Yes, you do. Remember Potions yesterday? Snape was telling you off, then he got distracted by Marlene shrieking about Fred Weasley dropping roaches on her?"

"What about it?"

Luella grinned. "Marlie was talking to me about it this morning. Fred's innocent. Marlie just pretended he was picking on her to distract Snape. Now she's a bit scared they might try and get revenge."

Deanna grinned broadly. "Cool! I'd watch that."

"Good god, can't you give the girl a break? She got you off the hook with Snape, and you want to see her suffer for it? Where's your principles?"

"I have none, I'm Slytherin. We're the evil house, remember?" A hint of bitterness crept into her voice.

Luella lowered her voice. "Not if I can help it. I'm here to put that right, don't forget. Anyway, we're here."

They had arrived on the grassy area next to the lake. Twenty brooms were laid out on the ground. The Gryffindors were already there, as was Madam Hooch.

"Come along, children! A broom each and we'll begin. Stand by your brooms and shout 'Up!' "

They did. Nineteen brooms remained on the ground. Luella's just rolled over. Marlene's, however, shot straight into her hand.

"Well done, Miss Lovegood!" cried Madam Hooch. "Clearly you've had practice! Ten points to Slytherin." Marlie just grinned. Luella realised that Marlie's Quidditch ambitions were not unfounded. She had obviously picked up quite a bit with such a Quidditch loving older brother.

Eventually, all of them were mounted on brooms and flying at small distances from the ground. Luella desperately tried to control the school broom, which had a disturbing tendency to lean to the left, sending her round in circles. She began to see Rianne's point about it not being a major form of transport. Indeed, she was rather relieved she wouldn't have to use them often. It simply wasn't natural being this far off the ground.

Deanna whizzed past her. "Lu, this is brilliant! Come on, fly a bit higher, it's great! You can see for miles!"

"All I want to see is my feet on solid ground." Luella moaned. She'd never liked heights, and the knowledge that her own sense of balance and a bit of wood were all that was keeping her in the air was not cheering. Still, she had no intention of being left behind, and spurred her broom that bit higher.

Marlene was in her element. She was already executing a few of the more basic Quidditch moves, and showing off to a very impressed Alex Lynch and Geoff Foxworth. Deanna looked distinctly annoyed. Nor was she the only one. The Weasleys were also looking displeased. Luella guessed that they were planning something. Watching them closely, she began to cruise, determined not to attract attention.

She did not have to wait long. Both twins pulled out their wands while Madam Hooch wasn't looking, and aimed a couple of well-placed Laughing Charms Marlene's way.

"Marlie, look out!" Luella screamed. Marlie immediately sent her broom straight up into the air, out of harm's way. The charms missed her and slammed right into Deanna, who immediately creased up laughing. She was laughing so hard that she slipped, nearly falling off her broom. Luella reacted immediately. Kicking her broom into gear, she zoomed over to her friend and steadied her. Rianne, who had seen everything, did the same and held Deanna up on the other side. However, although they managed to prevent her falling, they were unable to stop her Sneakoscope falling out of her robes and plummeting to the ground.

"Oh no!" Deanna cried in between her giggles. "My... haha... Sneakoscope, heehee!" Marlene had by this time pulled her broom round and was watching from above. Seeing the small silvery object fall, she was immediately on its trail, not taking her eyes off it. The entire class froze, watching intently. Marlie was in real danger of crashing. However, about a metre from the ground, she snatched the Sneakoscope up and landed safely. The students breathed again.

Rianne and Luella, once they'd recovered immediately began clapping. "Well done, Marlie!" Luella cried.

"Damn, Lovegood, you're good!" Rianne shouted. Even Deanna was impressed, albeit grudgingly.

"She was *snicker* lucky." Deanna shrugged, still holding grimly on despite the magically induced laughter.

Madam Hooch had arrived on the scene. She did not look happy. "Weasley! Weasley! I saw that! You do not cast spells on fellow students when they are on brooms! Twenty points from Gryffindor and a detention each! Are you alright, Miss Tyler?"

Deanna nodded weakly. Madam Hooch performed the counter charm, and they all descended to the ground. They were met as they landed by Professor Snape, who had

been watching from a window and had apparently seen everything. His face was a mask of cold, terrifying, fury.

"Well, well. Mr. Frederick and Mr. George Weasley. I am beginning to see rather too much of you these days. Madam Hooch, I trust you have already punished these two?"

Madam Hooch nodded. "Ten points deducted each and a detention for each of them, Professor."

Snape seemed satisfied. "Excellent. Miss Tyler, are you recovered?"

Deanna nodded. "Yes sir, I'm fine now."

"I am very glad to hear it. You boys," here he turned to the Weasleys, "may find this difficult to believe, but I do not relish the prospect of writing to students' parents telling them their offspring have been injured or even killed while at Hogwarts. I do not wish to hear of either of you endangering the life of another student again. Miss Tyler nearly fell off her broom thanks to your little stunt, and could have been seriously injured. Be very careful. I'm watching you two closely." Snape's face was terrifying to behold. Even Deanna was quelled into submission. He turned his attention to Rianne and Luella.

"Your quick thinking and flying skills almost certainly saved your friend's life. Five points each to Slytherin. However, as for you, Miss Lovegood..." He turned to Marlie with his eyes blazing. "What were you thinking of? Clearly, your association with top Quidditch players has given you ideas above your station as to your flying skills. What exactly was so important as to cause you to go into that dive? You could have been seriously hurt."

Marlene, pale and trembling, held out the Sneakoscope. "It was this, sir. It fell out of Deanna's robes. I didn't want it to get broken, sir." As she said this, she began to realise how ridiculous this sounded. She looked away, reddening, unable to bear Snape's gaze.

Snape took the Sneakoscope from her and held it in his hand, looking at it. It remained motionless. They all held their breath, waiting for his reaction.

When Snape spoke again, his voice was soft. None of them were fooled as to this. Snape was far more dangerous when soft-spoken.

"Do you really think this toy is worth risking your life for, Lovegood?"

Marlie whispered "No, sir."

"Then you will understand why I am taking five points from Slytherin and giving you a detention. You will be in my office tonight at seven o'clock. Miss Tyler, your Sneakoscope." He handed it back to her and left without a word. Marlie just hung her head and tried not to cry.

Madam Hooch interrupted the silence. "Well, seeing as the lesson is nearly finished, you had better all get going and have some time to yourselves. I think we could all do with a breather. Weasley, Weasley, stay here, I need to arrange your detentions. The rest of you, dismissed."

At seven o'clock that night, a trembling, sick, Marlie Lovegood left the Nest and headed for Snape's dungeon classroom. It wasn't far. Marlie had always prided herself on her law-abiding nature, and now having to do a detention had seriously worried her. Particularly as it involved Snape. Apparently Fred Weasley's detention had involved amputating tarantula legs then removing the hair. Without magic. Marlene, having seen some of the things decorating Snape's classroom, hardly dared think what he'd have her doing. So long as it didn't involve snakes.

She knocked on the door and heard Snape answer "Enter." She pushed the door open falteringly and came face to face with the Slytherin Quidditch captain and Beater, fourth year Marcus Flint, who was sitting across the desk from Snape.

"Sit down, Miss Lovegood." Snape said calmly. "No doubt you two are already aware of each other, but I will introduce you anyway. Miss Lovegood, this is Marcus Flint, fourth year, Beater and Slytherin's Captain of Quidditch. Flint, this is Marlene Lovegood, a Slytherin first year."

"Mike's sister. I've heard of you. Mike reckons you want to be Seeker some day." Flint growled.

"Maybe sooner than you think." Snape said softly. "Miss Lovegood, please familiarise Flint with the events that led to you being here this evening."

Marlene was now thoroughly confused. Surely it was not usual practice for Quidditch captains to sit in on detentions? However, given that anything was preferable to grating snakeskin or milking cobras, she launched into a full rendition of that morning's flying lesson. A very full rendition, involving much detail of exactly how fast she'd avoided the Weasleys' hex, and how narrowly she'd managed to catch the Sneakoscope.

"I thought it was going to hit the ground. In fact, I thought *I* was! But I was able to tease enough speed out of the broom, pull up and grab the Sneakoscope out of the air just in time." Marlene finished, quite out of breath.

Snape nodded towards Flint. "You see? Despite the inevitable exaggerations, the story is true enough. She was able to catch a small, fast-falling and very difficult to see object while avoiding damage or injury to either herself or the broom. Now, I don't pretend to be an expert on these things, quite the contrary, but that was a very impressive bit of flying, especially for one so young."

Flint looked impressed, if a little sceptical. "I'll have to see her in action. But we do need someone now Aidan's left. The reserves are shocking."

Snape seemed pleased. "Well, you are captain, it's your choice. It's not quite dark yet, why don't we go out to the pitch and try Miss Lovegood out? I've taken the liberty of acquiring a broom and some of those things the Muggles call ping-pong balls."

And with that, Marlie found herself trailing after Snape with a school broom in her hand, and Flint carrying a box of ping-pong balls behind her. Out on the Quidditch pitch, Snape proceeded to sit back and watch as Flint threw balls into the air for her to catch. Marlie soon began to relax and enjoy herself, as she quickly snatched every single one out of the sky. Eventually, it became too dark to continue and Snape pronounced the session closed. Marlene landed her broom. If that had been detention, it was worth getting into trouble to get a few more like that.

Snape was looking at Flint. "Well, Flint? What do you think?"

Flint was grinning. "She's good. We'll take her. I don't care if she is a first year, I don't think we'll find a better flier in the school."

Snape nodded. "Excellent. I shall check with Professor Dumbledore, but I doubt there'll be a problem. It has happened before, after all."

Marlie was confused. However, it seemed she was no longer in trouble. "Er, Professor, what exactly is going on? What has happened before?"

Snape was smiling in the half-light. "Miss Lovegood, I take it you are familiar with the sport of Quidditch?"

Her eyes widened. Could he mean...? "Of course I am, my brother plays."

"And are you aware that this year, Slytherin House needs a Seeker for it's Quidditch team?"

"Yes. But what...?"

"What does that have to do with you?" Snape interrupted. "Simple. You have shown undoubted flying ability, a sharp eye for detail and very quick reflexes. We're offering you a place on the team."

Marlie's jaw dropped. Whatever she had expected, it had not been this. "Me? On the House team? Are you serious?"

Snape and Flint both nodded. "You interested?" Flint asked.

Marlie nodded eagerly. "Am I interested? It's all I dreamed of! But wait, I'll need a broom of my own."

"It can be arranged. Do you have one at home?" Snape asked.

"Yeah, a Cleansweep Six."

Snape turned to Flint. "Is that good?"

Flint looked ecstatic. "The second best broom on the market. Only better one is the Cleansweep Seven which Mike's got."

Marlie grinned. "I know. Mum gave it to him as a reward for winning the Cup last year. I got his old one. Fantastic flier, really smooth ride, great at turning."

Snape coughed gently. "If I may interrupt this no doubt fascinating conversation on the relative merits of various brooms."

Marlie and Flint both turned to listen.

"I do not think there will be a problem with this arrangement, but I still need to speak to the Headmaster about this. I then need to contact your mother and request that she send your broomstick. I think she will be quite pleased to do so. In the mean time, however, may I ask that you both speak of this as little as possible. I have no doubt that Misses Tyler, Martin and Stormosi will soon know all about it, and I believe the rest of the team have a right to know. However, I would prefer everyone else in Slytherin House to remain in the dark until I have confirmed this. I would prefer for the other houses to know nothing for the near future. Let us keep our secret weapon secret, hmm?" He smiled, leading Flint and Marlie back into the school. "It is getting late. You two return to the Nest, I shall let you know in the morning."

Marlie entered her dorm room with a swagger in her step. Rianne, Deanna and Luella were all seated around, doing homework and waiting to hear what their dorm mate's detention had involved.

"Well?" asked Rianne curiously. "What happened?"

"Was it horrible?" Luella asked.

"Did he have you gutting grass snakes or marinading adder spleens or something?" Deanna grinned evilly.

"Adders don't have spleens, do they?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"Not when Snape's finished with them, no." Deanna grinned.

Marlie beamed back. "No, no and no! So happens it wasn't really a detention at all! He was so impressed by my flying this morning that he wanted Flint to see me in action!"

"And...?" the other girls asked.

"And..." Marlie paused for effect. "I have just been made Seeker for the House team. The first team too, not just the reserves!"

"What?" "You're kidding!" "But first years never..." "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Snape's speaking to Professor Dumbledore tonight!" she snapped. "Isn't it wonderful? I'm going to be a Seeker!"

Rianne and Luella were immediately full of congratulations. "Well done, Marlie!" "Yeah, the official House team, that's amazing! Good luck, you must be really good."

Deanna had been quiet up until now. However, she could hold it in no longer.

"Oh yeah, really good. It was detention, Marlie! You were meant to be being punished! You heard Snape this morning, you could have been killed showing off like that. And then you go and get yourself onto the Quidditch team? Well, Snape may be fooled by you, but I'm not. You're a snobbish, irritating little know-it-all crawler, and you're only on the team because you've got a brother on it already, and because you suck up to the teachers all the time!"

Marlie was struck dumb. However, she soon recovered. Furious, she yelled back.

"Yeah? Teachers' pet, am I? Spoilt stuck up know it all, am I? You'll see, Deanna Tyler! I won that place on the team through pure ability, nothing more! You're just jealous because you didn't get picked. And Mike had nothing to do with it, either. At least I've got a brother, and a proper family. At least I'm not some slutty Ministry witch's bastard!"

Deanna slapped her round the face, hard. She stared at her, trembling with rage and fury. "Don't you ever insult my mother again, Lovegood."

Marlene went red and rubbed her eyes. She looked at Deanna for the briefest of moments before running out the room in tears.

Deanna watched the door slam behind her with a look of grim satisfaction. "She asked for that." she whispered softly. "She deserved what she got." She turned to look at Rianne and Luella who were staring at her open mouthed. "Well? What are you two staring at? I'm going to the library." With that, she swept up her books and left.

Dorm relations took a turn for the worse after that. The atmosphere could have been cut with a knife. Deanna and Marlene were now not speaking to each other at all. Marlene was also rather cold with Luella, as was Rianne, who had taken Marlie's side. Rianne would talk to Deanna, but the four of them increasingly found themselves hanging around in pairs, Deanna with Luella and Rianne with Marlie.

Luella tried to reason with Deanna. "Dee, don't you think this is getting silly? You shouldn't have slapped her, no matter what she said. And you did start it."

Deanna was unrepentant. "She still insulted my mother. Anyway, why should I care what she thinks of me? I can't stand the girl. If it means I no longer have to put up with that petulant whiny little voice of hers, then that can only be a good thing."

Any attempt to make peace with Marlie was also doomed to failure.

"Deanna Tyler's had it in for me since we met in Diagon Alley." she fumed. "I don't know what I did to upset her, and I've tried to be friendly, but she just never wanted to know. OK, I shouldn't have said that about her mother, but I was angry! She virtually accused me of crawling my way onto the team and using my family connections. Well, I'll show her. Come the first match of the season, I'll show her who's teacher's pet." Luella decided to give up. Even Rianne was being most unhelpful.

"Look, Luella, you're a nice girl and all, but you're seriously misguided in your choice of friends, I think. Deanna's disliked Marlie since she got here, and now she's using any opportunity to pick a fight. She's been horrible to Marlie, who's not done anything to deserve that. Tell Deanna to sort her act out, because she's not going to win any friends behaving like that."

It was made worse by the arrival of Marlie's broom over breakfast a few days later, and an effusive note from her parents congratulating her on making the team so young. Deanna just got up and left her breakfast without a word. Marlie watched her go with a highly fed up look on her face.

Things came to a head on the way to Herbology. They had just had Transfiguration with the Gryffindors, and were making their way across the fields to Professor Sprout's greenhouses. Deanna and Luella were walking ahead of Rianne and Marlene, when a noise from behind distracted them.

Turning round, Luella saw Marlie being accosted by the Weasley twins.

"What was that parcel you got this morning, Lovegood?" George was asking her. "Looked like a broom to me, didn't it Fred?"

Fred grinned. "Looked like one to my eyes. Cleansweep, isn't it? Very nice broom indeed. But what's it doing with a first year? We're not allowed them. Maybe we should have a word with your house master, see if we can lose you those points you cost us."

Marlie looked furious. "Special circumstances. I'm allowed one."

"Oooh! Lovegood's allowed one, is she? Special, is she? Do siblings of Quidditch stars and children of Ministry witches get preferential treatment then?" George oozed sarcasm.

Rianne stepped in at this point. "Given that you're the sons of Arthur Weasley and brothers of Charlie, I'd hardly think so. Marlie's allowed that broom because she's the best flier in the year."

Fred bowed mockingly. "So sorry, Your Stormosiness. But you'll forgive us if we don't take the word of one of your little clan that there's no family connections being abused here."

Rianne's face was cold and impassive. "I'd never draw on my family connections to get power." she said softly.

George laughed harshly. "Bloody good thing too, we don't want You-Know-Who coming back, do we?"

Rianne's voice had gone dangerously quiet, almost Snape-quiet, in fact. "What's that supposed to mean, Weasley?"

Fred raised an eyebrow. "Just that with a mother in Azkaban, we can't afford to take any chances with you."

"Azkaban... how dare you? YOU TAKE THAT BACK!!" Rianne screamed. "You-Know-Who killed my mother, she'd never serve him!"

Fred and George had gone uncharacteristically quiet. In fact they were looking rather guilty.

"You don't know." whispered George. "Your dad never told you!"

"Told me what?" Rianne demanded. "I was always told that my mother was killed by You-Know-Who."

Fred and George were looking at the ground, distinctly uncomfortable. They both spoke at once.

"No, if you were never told..."

"Best you don't know..."

"Not from us, anyway..."

"We've got to get going, we've got History of Magic next and we don't want to be late for it." With that, they both rushed off as fast as they could, leaving Rianne pale and trembling.

Chapter Seven: More Slytherin Secrets

"Azkaban, she can't be... she's dead, surely?" Rianne whispered. Turning on the three of them, she snarled, "Tell me you didn't know this!"

Deanna and Marlie were both shaking their heads, stunned. "We didn't know, honest, Ri!" "Mum always told me Branwen Stormosi was a casualty of You-Know-Who as well, I swear I didn't know anything about this."

Luella tried to offer a crumb of comfort. "They were making it up, Ri. Just trying to upset you. You know what they're like, always joking around."

Rianne was not convinced. "That was genuine guilt in their faces! They thought I knew, but when they realised I didn't, they were too principled to throw it in my face. I mean, those two, actually wanting to go to History of Magic! No, it's true alright."

Deanna stepped in. "They might just be very good actors. Chances are they're laughing about it even now. No, there's only one way of making sure and that's to look up the trial records. They're in the library, Defence Against the Dark Arts students doing their NEWTs need to refer to them. We can check them out at lunchtime. I'll help you."

Rianne looked grateful. "That'd help. I need to know for sure. I can't believe my mother was a Death Eater, I can't!"

Herbology passed all too slowly for them all. As soon as break began, all four of them rushed for the library so as to locate the relevant files. However, their plan hit an immediate snag.

The Reign of Terror records were all located in the Restricted Section, which students were not allowed to access without a note from a teacher. Madam Pince, the librarian, was giving them suspicious looks, so they hastily went to a table in the deserted History of Magic section.

"That's torn it." Marlie said quietly. "How are we going to get in there? I mean, we don't have a plausible reason for looking, and there's no teachers who'd let us anyway."

They fell silent. Rianne looked close to tears. Luella felt awful. Marlie looked despairing. Deanna, however, looked like she was doing some very hard thinking.

At length she spoke. However, it was not her usual self-confident, brash manner with which she announced her idea. Instead, it was in a fearful, little girl tone of voice quite unlike her usual self.

"You could ask Snape?" she said quietly. All three girls looked at her disbelievingly.

"Snape?" Marlie could hardly believe her ears. "No thank you! I know I'm his pet Quidditch star," here sounded a distinct note of sarcasm, "but let's at least get a trophy or two under my belt before I push anything."

Deanna shook her head. "Not you. Luella."

Rianne and Marlie turned to look at her. Rianne seemed curious, Marlie disbelieving.

"Why me?" Luella asked, bridleing.

"Yeah, why her?" snapped Marlie. "If anyone, I'd've thought Rianne would be best at getting round Snape."

Deanna sighed. "You don't get it, do you? It's not a question of who, it's why! Lu's the only one with a decent reason."

Rianne still looked uncomprehending. Marlie, however, was beginning to understand. "I get it, you want Lu because she's..."

"Muggle-born." Deanna interrupted. "And Snape's already looking out for her on that score. What better reason could she have than to want to go through old trial records and find out who's linked to Voldemort and who isn't, so she knows who's likely to pick on her for being Muggle-born."

Rianne looked delighted. "Brilliant! Wish I'd thought of it myself. Even better, we've got Potions next. You can ask him afterwards, get straight on it."

Luella felt far from pleased to be landed with this. "OK. But you lot are coming with me. I'm not facing him on my own."

Potions passed without event. The Weasley twins were in a strangely subdued mood, and didn't complain, not even when Snape docked them points for not knowing that aconite and monkshood were the same plant. Meanwhile, the Slytherin girls were determined to be on their best behaviour. Rianne and Luella volunteered information every time he asked, winning a few points for Slytherin in the process. Marlie went so far as to give Fred Weasley a hand with his henbane leaves, while even Deanna was heard exclaiming in a loud voice how much she enjoyed Potions, how wrong she'd been about it before, and how she was now thinking of taking it as a NEWT. It appeared to work, for Snape was in a relatively nice mood by the end of the class. So nice, he didn't even give any detentions out. As the rest of the class headed for the door, Deanna gave Luella a nudge, whispering "Now!"

Feeling ill inside, Luella went up to Snape's desk. Snape glanced up and said in a somewhat irked voice "Yes, Miss Martin?"

"Erm, sir, I was wondering if I could possibly..." She hesitated. Rianne gave her a look which clearly said "Go on!"

Snape was regarding her with the resigned look of one well used to getting unusual requests from students. "Yes?"

Luella took a deep breath. "I was wondering if I could possibly have a note of permission to look at the Restricted Section."

Snape looked at her strangely. "An interesting request from a first year. May I ask why? I might add you will need to give a very convincing reason."

Luella gulped. "Well, sir, I was thinking about what you said last week, about me possibly being vulnerable because I'm Muggle-born. And... I wanted to go through old trial records from the time Voldemort was around, so I know whose parents were linked with him and whose weren't. That way, I know who to watch out for at school. I want to know who I can trust and who I can't." She smiled her most fetching smile. Please, please, let him be fooled, she thought. Behind her, Rianne, Marlie and Deanna were clutching each other in anticipation.

Snape noticed the three of them watching, and appeared to be considering them carefully. His eyes particularly lingered on Deanna and Rianne, then Deanna again. He turned back to Luella, thinking deeply.

"Normally I would refuse, but given your circumstances... Alright, you may use the Restricted Section. On one condition, that you tell no student outside this room what you are up to. That goes for you three as well!" he said sternly.

All four of them nodded. "Done." Luella said eagerly.

"Secondly", continued Snape, "this note of permission extends only to yourself and Miss Lovegood. If I find Miss Tyler or Miss Stormosi anywhere near the Restricted Section, there shall be trouble. Understand?"

Luella nodded, her heart sinking. Behind her, there were outraged cries from Rianne and Deanna.

"Sir, why not us?" Deanna asked, hurt.

"Because, Miss Tyler, there are things in the trial records that it would be better you two did not see. Things concerning your families and friends of your families that all in all, it is best you don't know about. I cannot explain further, but I have my reasons. One day, you will know all, when you are old enough to take it. Miss Lovegood's family is relatively trauma free, and so I am allowing her to view these materials. Thirdly, this note extends only to trial records and newspapers from the time of the Dark Lord. All other materials are out of bounds, and looking at them will bring trouble. This is an important privilege, and I don't want it abused. Understand me?" He looked severely into all their eyes in turn. The girls nodded wordlessly.

"Good. Finally, if any information you read in there should prove shocking or dangerous, I demand that you do not share it with your fellow students. Talk it over with me or another member of staff first. I do not want it all over the school that so-and-so's parents were Death Eaters, someone else's father is in Azkaban, or anything

else of that nature. There are many individuals in this school with buried secrets, and I'd like them to remain exactly that. Lord Voldemort is dead and gone, there is little to be gained by raking the past over. Are you all clear on that?" More nods.

"Thank you. In that case..." He produced a parchment and quill, and proceeded to write a note of permission for them. "There you are. Use it well, or you will find yourselves barred from the Restricted Section entirely for a very long time. Now get to lunch." With that, he dismissed them.

Outside, they immediately crowded round Luella to have a look.

"Wow, you got it!" Marlie whispered. "He must like you, Lu, he never does that normally!"

Rianne was enthralled. "So we can go and find out! Fantastic! Got to hand it to you, Luella, you're good. You too, Deanna, that was such a great idea of yours. Who'd have thought Professor Snape, of all people, would give in?"

Luella shook her head, bemused. Evidently, Snape was a softer touch than people thought. However, it seemed unwise to push this fact. "Let's not get carried away here. It only lets me and Marlie in. He must know about your mother, Ri, doesn't want you finding out."

"What about me, though?" Deanna demanded. "What's so bad about my family? I don't even have any, all I've got's Mum."

"Maybe that's the problem." Rianne said softly. "The rest of them are either dead or in Azkaban, or still on the run somewhere."

Marlie shuddered. "Don't. I don't want to think of You-Know-Who supporters out there somewhere. Especially if they're related to..." She stopped but the look she gave Deanna was unmistakable.

Deanna snapped, "Fine. Fine. I'm going for lunch. You two had better get cracking then, hadn't you?" She turned and headed for the Great Hall. Rianne paused to wish the two of them luck.

"I hope you find it. Or rather, I hope you don't find it!" she whispered, a haunted look in her eyes. "Snape's right, You-Know-Who's dead and gone. Why can't people just let the past lie?" Her voice broke on the last word. Tears in her eyes, she turned and followed Deanna.

Marlie turned to Luella. "I really hope we don't find it, you know. Must be awful for her, believing her mother was dead all these years, a martyr for the good guys, then to find out she was working for the other side all along."

Luella nodded. That, however, was the least of her worries. Deanna had also been prevented from seeing the records. What was her family hiding?

She turned to Marlie. "Come on, let's go. We'll have lunch first then get started. This sort of thing is best done on a full stomach."

It took much searching of trial records, most of which were exceedingly dull or incredibly disturbing, before anything of interest turned up. Most of the names they had never heard of before, although they did turn up a few cases which had been brought by Mrs. Tyler and Mrs. Lovegood.

"Your mother sure got around, didn't she? She's down as arresting Auror in so many cases. No wonder she's paranoid, she must have that many people wanting revenge."

Marlie nodded. "She's always telling me and Mike stories about her arrests. Always using them as instructive fables. I may as well skip Defence Against the Dark Arts, Mum's been drumming the basic principles into me ever since I was old enough to understand them. How on earth I managed to be able to trust anyone with her as a mum, I don't know. Mind you, Dad's pretty much the opposite, will talk to anyone. You'd like him. Your typical mad scientist."

"Your dad's a mad scientist? Cool! Does he have a lab with lots of flasks containing weird and wonderful concoctions?"

Marlie laughed. "No, you've got him mixed up with Professor Snape there. He does however have a garage full of bits of machinery and all sorts of gadgets. And Chris Bryant's Walkman, which knowing him, he'll probably declare irreparable because he wants the bits for something."

Luella giggled, causing Madam Pince to tell them off. They grinned at each other before returning to their search.

Marlie flipped over a page and gasped. "Oh my god, Lu! Look!"

Luella looked. "Lucius Malfoy. Arrested for the usual Death Eater stuff. Let off because he was under the Imperius curse. The Imperius curse?"

"Curse that lets you put someone under your absolute control. You-Know-Who put lots of people under it. Course, Mum reckons that there's a lot of genuine Death Eaters out there who just pretended they were under it to keep out of Azkaban. I don't know whether to believe her or not. Mum's really paranoid at the best of times. But that's not why I pointed this guy out. You remember I told you about my aunt and uncle who Mum doesn't speak to?"

Luella nodded. "Your aunt's a cat breeder, isn't she?"

"Well, yes. And that's her husband. That's my uncle by marriage, Uncle Lucius. And..." She drew a sharp breath. "Mum and Auror Alastor Moody are arresting officers! Wow, no wonder they haven't spoken in years. Mum must still be angry he got let off."

Marlie gazed into the distance. "The things you learn about your family. Well, I hardly know my aunt and uncle, and I've never had chance to grow fond of them. Mum's seen to that. So I've got Death Eater connections too. At least they're distant ones. Doesn't really bother me."

She returned to looking at trial records. Luella began flipping backwards through the records for 1976. "There's a lot here, Marlie. Any idea what time it would have happened?"

Marlie pursed her lips. "Well, Rianne was born in September 1977, so it must have been after then because not even Barty Crouch would have sent a pregnant woman to Azkaban, surely?"

"Don't know. Who's Barty Crouch?"

"Used to have Mum's job. Until 1984, then he got moved sideways because of some scandal involving his son. Then Mum got promoted. Apparently he was really anti-Dark Arts, really tough on suspects."

Luella began thinking. "OK, so she was sent down after Ri was born. But not that long after, because otherwise Rianne would know about it. So we're looking at some time between October 1977 and early 1980, say."

"OK. You take 1977 to end of 1978, I'll do 1979 and first six months of 1980."

"Done. I'll have a look at some back issues of the Daily Prophet while I'm at it."

They began searching systematically. It took the remainder of their lunch hour, and a good deal of their afternoon as well. Luella had by this time got bored of the trials and was now looking at various incident reports. These were rather more interesting, although she did find herself getting continually sidetracked. She had not been searching long, however, when, on 13th December 1977, she found something mentioning Mrs. Stormosi in passing. It wasn't anything to do with Rianne, though. It was Deanna.

Not Deanna herself, of course; Deanna hadn't even been born then. But attached to the document was a rather official looking photo of none other than Mrs. Tyler. Luella gulped and read on. Half of the report had been blacked out, presumably the gory details, but there was enough there to get the gist of what had happened.

Apparently, on 1st December, Caitlin Tyler had been abducted by Death Eaters on the way to visit her friend Branwen Stormosi. Outside the house, she'd been ambushed and swiftly removed to an unknown location, where a gang of Death Eaters had proceeded to torture her in an attempt to find out what the Ministry's next move would be. They had intended to kill her after, but she'd been able to fake her own death and escape, with the assistance of Agent Raven, presumably a Ministry spy. However, she was apparently leaving the Ministry and going into hiding to avoid further attacks. The report concluded that as Voldemort believed her dead, she would be safe, as long as she remained hidden.

Luella laid the paper down, shaking. This must have been why Snape had forbidden Deanna to come. He must have known about the attack on her mother and not wanted her to find out.

She closed the binder containing the papers. For a moment, she considered removing the paper from it's case, but it was protected by an Anti-Theft Charm well beyond Luella's abilities to undo. She glanced at Marlie, engrossed in a batch of Daily Prophets. No use showing her, not given current relations between Deanna and Marlie. Quietly, she replaced the folder and resumed looking at trials.

She was distracted by a squeal from Marlie. "Lu, look! It's here!" She pointed out an article headlined "WIFE OF QUIDDITCH STAR JAILED". On the front cover was a picture of a woman looking for all the world like an older Rianne.

Marlie was reading quietly. "Says here she was caught passing information to You-Know-Who endangering the lives of various Aurors, and may have been responsible for co-ordinating Mrs. Tyler's abduction in late 1977. Mrs. Tyler was abducted by You-Know-Who?" Marlie looked interested.

Luella hastily interrupted. "Yeah, I saw an article on it earlier. She was ambushed by Death Eaters but escaped. On her way to the Stormosis' at the time. Went into hiding herself after that. Can't remember what I did with the article though."

Marlie shrugged. "Well, not important. This is though. Mum arrested her - apparently after an elaborate sting operation involving another Auror, Frank Longbottom, and a fake Fidelius Charm. Mum pretended to make Mrs. Stormosi Secret Keeper for a Fidelius Charm that would protect Longbottom. That charm will keep anything secret, but the secret must be placed with a Secret Keeper. If they divulge it, the charm is broken. Anyway, Mum pretended to make her a Secret Keeper for this Auror. Gave her false information, which got passed to You-Know-Who. A load of Death Eaters acted on it, got caught and promptly grassed up Mrs. Stormosi, who got sent down for life. Wow. My mother is so cool." Marlie sounded impressed.

"I wouldn't say that to Rianne. She'll be anything but impressed." Luella warned. "Let's have a look at the trial record." They did. Nothing new was repeated there, but there was an addendum.

"Look at this, Marls. Apparently she got let out in 1984 after giving names of other Death Eaters and promising to abjure the Dark Arts. Then got sent down again virtually straight away after she met up with some other freed Death Eaters and tortured Longbottom and his wife for information on Voldemort's whereabouts, and probably revenge. Seems she wanted to restore Voldemort to power." Luella said grimly.

Marlie shook her head. "This is bad. Really bad. The spying was one thing, she might have been lied to, in the wrong place at the wrong time or set up. But the second time around..." She looked up, horrified. "Rianne's going to be so upset by this. But there's no doubt about it. Branwen Stormosi's a Death Eater."

Marlie proved absolutely right. Rianne broke down completely at the news and spent the entire evening curled up in her bed sobbing. Not even Marlie could comfort her.

Deanna, Luella and Marlie sat together on the other side of the dorm. Rianne had drawn the curtains on her bed and was refusing to talk to anyone. Marlie toyed with Snowy anxiously.

"What are we going to do? I mean, it's the weekend tomorrow, so she's got that time to deal with it. But we've got classes on Monday, what do we do then? She's in no state to go to any of them. But she'll get in real trouble if she doesn't go. Questions will be asked." She looked worried sick, although more about them getting found out than about anything else.

"We could tell people she's ill?" Luella suggested.

Deanna was dismissive. "Then they'll want to know why she's not in the hospital wing. And if she goes there, Madam Pomfrey will soon have it out of her what really happened."

They all looked very depressed at this. They were facing almost certain punishment. Snape had specifically warned them against upsetting fellow students with information about their families. Their only hope of salvation was that it hadn't actually been them who'd told Rianne about her mother. But then, telling Snape that meant that he'd know they'd been lying about why they wanted to go in the Restricted Section. It was a no-win situation. Luella in particular felt worst about it all. After all, she'd done the asking. She really didn't want to face Snape with the news that she'd taken advantage of him. It was funny, but even though she had no great liking for the Potions master, she felt guilty about having betrayed his trust. Somehow, she doubted he'd have done the same. There was something fundamentally honest about Snape. Vindictive, but honest. She remembered the previous week's Flying lesson, and Marlie getting told off for risking her life for a Pocket Sneakoscope. She remembered Snape taking the Sneakoscope off her, and it remaining still and silent in his hands. Shuddering, she felt tears begin to prick at her eyeballs. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be a Slytherin after all, if she couldn't even manage a bit of petty manipulation and rulebreaking without feeling this guilty.

Deanna was looking rather nervous herself. "We might as well face it, folks. We are in deep, deep trouble. Snape's going to kill us."

"And whose fault is that?" Marlie snapped back. "It was your idea to ask him! If we'd gone for a soft touch like Quirrell or Flitwick, we'd be alright!"

"Yeah?" Deanna was rather tetchy herself by this stage. "And do you have any idea how we'd have talked Quirrell or Flitwick into it? Because I don't. And it worked, didn't it? We got what we needed. OK, so we get in trouble. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Er... we get expelled?" Marlie suggested. "Snape writes home to our parents about it? I don't know what your mother's like when she's cross, but the last thing I want is for both Professor Snape and my mother to be on my case!"

Deanna was dismissive. "You won't get expelled. Slytherin don't have anyone else to be Seeker, they're not sending you home in a hurry. And I can't see Snape expelling one of us but not the others."

"Well, that's really comforting to know." Marlie snapped.

Luella glanced over at Rianne's bed. Sooty had climbed underneath the curtains and the level of crying had diminished somewhat. Evidently Rianne was feeling a little better.

"Rianne sounds less upset. That's one good thing."

Marlie shook her head. "This is all those Weasleys' fault! If they hadn't said anything to her... Why can't people just keep their mouths shut?" She was visibly trembling.

They were distracted by the sound of Rianne's bed hangings being ripped open. Rianne was sitting there, Sooty on her lap. She was no longer crying, but her eyes were still very red, and she looked pale.

For a moment, no one said anything, just looked at each other. Finally Marlie asked tentatively "Are you OK, Rianne?"

Rianne did not answer her. Instead she just looked at them each in turn and whispered hoarsely "Why did no one tell me about this?"

Luella didn't know what to say. Nor did Marlie, apparently, as she just avoided Rianne's gaze. Deanna was the only one to reply. "We didn't know, Rianne. We're sorry." She sounded genuinely remorseful.

Rianne shook her head. "Not you three. My family... Why did they never tell me the truth? Why did Dad never tell us? And Debra, she was five at the time, she must have known. Why did they let Kat and me go on believing our mother was some kind of martyr?" She was shaking, but not just with sadness this time. Now, she was trembling with barely concealed anger. Her voice rose to almost a scream. "Why did they never tell me?? Why did I have to find out now? Like this?" She wiped tears from her eyes.

Deanna and Marlie both looked very uncomfortable. Marlie spoke first. "Well, maybe they just wanted to protect you. Didn't want you to get hurt."

Rianne just laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah? That worked well, didn't it? Cowards all of them. And Dad! He's meant to be a Gryffindor, isn't he? They're meant to be brave." The tears were coming again. "So why didn't he have the courage to tell me my mother was a Death Eater?" She held her head in her hands. Marlie got up and put an arm round her, looking far from comfortable. Luella got up and joined her. None of them spoke.

At length Rianne looked up. Although still visibly upset, she looked purposeful. "Debra knows. She must do. She'd remember them arresting her."

Marlie looked terrified. "Rianne, please, don't do anything hasty. Please."

"Don't tell me what to do, Lovegood." Rianne snapped harshly. "I heard you three talking about how to stay out of trouble with Snape. Well, tough. I'm not keeping this quiet just to save your necks. I'm going to find my sister. Have it out with her." With that, she swept out of the dorm. The three of them looked at each other helplessly, then followed her.

The Nest was relatively quiet that evening. It was still early evening, not quite eight o'clock yet, and quite a few Slytherins were at clubs and meetings. However, there were still a fair few people around.

Debra was sitting in front of the fire with the other Slytherin Prefects. They were discussing various punishments they'd given out recently. Rianne walked straight up to them.

Debra noticed her sister's approach and turned to greet her. She had just enough time to take in Rianne's dishevelled appearance and begin a question of concern, when Rianne cut her dead.

"Why did you never tell me?" she demanded. "Why have you and Dad lied to me all these years!"

Debra went quiet. She looked around nervously, licking her lips. The other Prefects were all watching intently. Across the common room, Kat was scrutinising them, a look of concern on her face. She was sitting next to Summer Montague and Laetitia Vetinari, her fellow Chasers, who were also watching carefully.

"Rianne, when have we ever - " Debra began before Rianne interrupted again.

"Don't try and pull the wool over my eyes, Debra!" Rianne shouted. "I know now! About... about Mum!"

Debra's expression changed to one of horror. Across the room, Kat suddenly looked confused. Deanna, Marlie and Luella could only huddle together and watch.

"Who told you?" Debra said softly.

Rianne shook her head. There was a gleam of hate in her eyes. "Doesn't matter how I found out. Thing is, why wasn't it from you or Dad? Why'd you let me find out now? Like this? I had to hear it from a pair of Gryffindors, do you realise that?" She was beginning to get hysterical.

Luella heard Marlie say quietly. "Rianne, please, be careful. Don't do this." Rianne appeared not to hear.

Debra was trying to keep a grip on the situation. "Alright, Ri, I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier, I know. Let's go somewhere more private and talk about this."

By this time, Kat had made her way over. "Talk about what? What about Mum? She's been dead for years, Debs."

Rianne laughed hysterically. "Didn't tell you either, did they? Maybe they didn't think it worth mentioning. Didn't think we'd mind."

"Tell me what? Debs, what's going on?" Kat looked terrified. Debra just looked guilty. Rianne was calmer, but her eyes glittered with fury.

"Go on, Debra. Tell her. Might as well have one of us find out from a family member." She paused. Debra looked fearfully from one to the other. The entire common room was listening intently. Some looked quite expectant.

Kat had a look of utter confusion and quiet desperation on her face. "Debra, what is it? Why's Rianne so upset?"

Rianne looked almost jubilant. "Yes, Debra, tell her why I'm so upset. Go on, I dare you. If you don't, I will."

Debra finally looked them both in the eyes. There was a pained, haunted look in her eyes. "Please, both of you, please understand. Dad and I, we did it for the best. Dad didn't want you having to bear the shame of knowing..." She hesitated and looked into the flames.

"Know what?" Kat asked, a look of dread in her eyes. Debra just hung her head.

Rianne turned on the middle Stormosi, wild-eyed and near breaking point. "They didn't want us knowing that our mother's not dead."

Kat stared in shock. "Not dead? But then... where is she?"

Rianne had a rictus grin on her face, the firelight dancing on her cheek making her look like some ancient death goddess. "She's in Azkaban, Kat." she said sweetly. "Our dear father and sister", here she shot an evil look at Debra, "didn't think it worth mentioning that she was working for You-Know-Who. Our sainted mother who we've both revered all our lives as a martyr for good against evil was really a Death Eater all along! And our father never had the guts to tell us!" Her voice rose to a scream as she shouted the last two sentences for all the common room to hear. All over the room, Slytherins were turning away. Some looked embarrassed. Others seemed shocked. Some, however, looked neither ashamed or surprised, but merely smirked, as if they'd expected this to come out sooner or later.

Kat had gone pale. Turning to Debra, she whispered "It's not true. Please, Debs. Tell me it's not true!" Kat's voice rose to a pitch. She looked like she was about to break down now. Debra didn't answer. She just hung her head and turned away. Kat really did break down at this point. Sinking slowly to her knees, she just screamed "Nooo!" and sobbed helplessly. Rianne had a look of grim satisfaction on her face. She seemed beyond grief now.

Debra shifted uncomfortably. Pleading, she turned to her sisters. "I am so sorry." she whispered softly. "I am so sorry you found out like this. Please understand, we thought it was for the best, at least Dad did. Took me aside after she was sentenced, made me promise never to tell either of you. Told me we had to pretend she'd died, that it was better that way. That he didn't want you growing up having to deal with what she really was. That he'd tell you both when you were old enough to take it. I'm so sorry, I really am."

Rianne was still seething. "Is that all you can say? You're sorry? Your secrecy has torn our family apart, and you're sorry? Look at Kat, look what you've done to her! To me!"

Debra was about to speak, when she seemed to notice something and shut up immediately. Behind her, Luella heard the common room door close, and everyone in the room turn to look as one. Gulping, Luella turned to see who had come in.

It was Professor Snape. He took in the scene at a glance and strode over to the fireside. When he spoke, his voice was soft and his eyes flashed dangerously.

"Would someone be so good as to tell me what the meaning of all this commotion is?"

No one answered. As one, the entire room looked at Debra. She looked at Snape, fear in her eyes. However, she composed herself quickly enough.

"Rianne found out about her mother, Professor."

Whatever Snape had been expecting, it had not been that. For a brief moment, he looked stunned. However, it was over all too quickly, and he turned to face Luella. Deanna and Marlie drew closer to her in terror and Luella quailed under his gaze.

"So", he said softly. "I give you a privilege and you abuse it. Is this the loyalty I can expect from you? You disappoint me, all of you. I had expected so much better. Especially you, Miss Martin. Of all of you, I thought you at least had more sense than to go spreading tales around." Luella did not dare meet his eyes. Snape turned away to speak to the Stormosis again.

"You three come to my office. I need to speak with you. As for you three," he turned back to the three trembling first years, "you will remain in the Serpent's Nest. When I have finished talking with the Stormosis, I will return for you. Do not think you will escape lightly from this!" With that, he swept out, the Stormosi girls trailing after him.

Chapter Eight: Picking Up The Pieces

Luella, Marlie and Deanna, not wishing to face the inevitable questions from their housemates, retreated to their dorm and locked the door. None of them spoke for a while. Marlie and Luella cuddled their cats, while Deanna just lay back on her bed and wished Spooky was a lap owl.

After a while, Marlie broke the silence. "What do you think's going on in there?"

The other two had no need to ask what she was referring to. Deanna shrugged.

"Don't know. Hope Rianne's not in too much trouble though."

Luella shook her head. "She's in an awful state, I doubt even Snape's going to dish out any punishment to her. I'd be more worried about us. You saw him in the Nest, he was furious with us for telling her without consulting him." She shivered, hoping beyond hope that Snape would have calmed down before sending for them.

"But we didn't tell her." Marlie pointed out. "The Weasley twins did. Surely Rianne will tell him that. I mean, she told Debra she found out from a pair of Gryffindors and Debra's got no reason to keep that quiet. Snape's not stupid, he'll put two and two together."

Luella shook her head. "That doesn't get us off the hook. Then he'll know we lied to him. Either way, we are still in it up to our necks."

"You lied to him, you mean." Marlie pointed out. "You did the asking."

"Less of that, Lovegood." Deanna snapped. "If Luella gets in trouble, we all do. It was a joint effort and Snape knows it. We're in this together."

Marlie shut up after that. However, she, like all of them, was pondering the question, what would Snape do to them?

Their agony was brought to an end around nine o'clock when Rianne reappeared. She looked calmer, if drained.

"Snape's in the common room." she said dully. "He wants to see you three. Now."

Without a word, the other three got up and left. Marlie turned to Rianne as they left and asked if she was OK.

Rianne shrugged. "I've felt better. Snape's not in a particularly good mood, but he's less angry than he was. I told him I found out about Mum from the Weasleys, so at least you're off the hook there." Marlie thanked her and followed the other two.

Snape was waiting for them downstairs. He did look less formidable than before, although not much. Luella couldn't help noticing how tired his eyes looked.

"Follow me." he ordered, then left the common room without a word. The three of them followed him, studiously avoiding the gaze of their housemates. Luella noticed that Debra and Kat were nowhere in sight. Like Rianne, they must have retreated to their dorms for peace and privacy.

Snape led them along the corridor to his dungeon classroom. He did not remain in the classroom however, but led them through the door behind his desk which opened into his private office. The office was smaller than the classroom, but no less bizarrely decorated. Everywhere were books, jars containing body parts of various creatures, and various flasks and phials of liquid. Perched in the corner was a black raven regarding them with a distrustful beady eye. It fluttered over to Snape and landed on his shoulder, nibbling his ear.

Three chairs had been set up in front of Snape's desk. Snape closed the door behind him, sat down and motioned for them to sit. They did so.

For a while, none of them spoke. Snape merely allowed his eyes to run across them distastefully. The girls just looked at the floor, none of them wanting to meet that gaze.

"Well." Snape said softly. "I have just had to endure a most unpleasant interview. Do you have any idea what your actions have done to that family?"

They did not respond. Snape continued.

"Uncharacteristically quiet, aren't we? I shall tell you what you have done. Two innocent young girls have had their view of their mother utterly destroyed in a single night. Katrina and Rianne have been severely traumatised by this. Who can say if they will ever fully recover? I cannot say what the effects will be, but they will never be the same again, thanks to this. They will never regard their sister in quite the same way as before. And I do not know if they will ever entirely forgive their father. In a way, I do not blame them. Quite why Alfredo Stormosi did not foresee something like this happening, I do not know. However, it is his prerogative to inform his daughters of family secrets and his alone! He will be most upset over this, I don't doubt. And as his daughters' house master, it is I who have the unhappy task of officially informing him of what has just transpired. It is not something I am looking forward to, believe me. Do you have any idea how much trouble you have caused?" Snape's face was a mask of fury.

Deanna's self-control snapped. "It wasn't us who told her!" she cried. "The Weasley twins first brought it up, not us! We didn't even know until they mentioned it."

Snape hissed at her. "Be quiet, Miss Tyler. It so happens Rianne Stormosi told me everything about your little plan, and the Weasleys' involvement. I shall certainly be speaking to Professor McGonagall about them in the morning. However, my immediate concern is you three." He glared at them furiously. "What on earth possessed you? Getting illicit access to the Restricted Section in order to find out for yourselves? And what makes you think that reading it in cold print was the best way to for her to know that? Or that you three are the ones best qualified to break that sort of news? Why on earth didn't you think of going to a teacher? Any one of us could

have broken that sort of news gently, or at least kept control of the situation while we informed Debra and Mr. Stormosi." Snape stared at them, exasperated.

Luella, Deanna and Marlie looked at each other. Now that they thought of it, it seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"Sorry, sir." Marlie whispered.

"We won't do it again." Luella said quietly.

"We didn't think." Deanna admitted.

"That much is obvious." Snape snarled. "I thought all of you had more sense. At least you are suitably remorseful. In recognition of that, I shall not be informing your parents this time."

"Thank you, sir." they all murmured.

Snape continued. "However, I cannot let you get away with this scot-free. You deliberately and knowingly lied to a teacher in order to get into the Restricted Section under false pretences. You broke the conditions attached to the permission I granted, by telling Rianne about her mother without first consulting me, and as a result, the whole of Slytherin House now knows about the Stormosi's past. This is exactly what I wished to avoid. Doubtless many of them knew anyway, and Debra has enough personal power to limit the damage. However, there will now be whispers all around the Serpent's Nest. Like mother, like daughter, they will be saying, and the Stormosi girls will never be entirely trusted again. Katrina is not your responsibility, but you will now be called on to protect Rianne from the fallout of all this. I trust you will do so." They all nodded.

"An apology to Miss Stormosi would not go amiss either. I am also taking ten points each from Slytherin and giving all three of you a detention. In addition, I am barring you from the Restricted Section at all for any reason until you reach fifth year."

"What!" "But that's not fair..." "Suppose we need to..."

"Silence!" roared Snape. "It is highly unlikely you will need to use it in the course of your studies before then in any case. If you do, you will need to ask Miss Stormosi to go on your behalf. You three have proven to my satisfaction that you cannot be trusted to use it responsibly. Maybe when you reach your OWL year, you will have grown up sufficiently to be trusted. Yes, Miss Tyler, I know you did not use it. However, the entire escapade was your idea, I believe. And I have no doubt you would have joined your friends had I allowed you too."

Deanna had been about to object, but realised that Snape was absolutely right - given the chance, she'd have gone too. Instead, she chose to keep quiet and accept her punishment.

Snape appeared to have calmed down a little. "Well, it is getting late. That will do for now. We all need rest, I think. I will arrange your detentions at a later date when I

have the luxury of time. In the mean time, I want you all to think carefully about what has happened tonight. If it means you all learn from this, it will not be a completely wasted experience. Miss Tyler, Miss Lovegood, you may go. Miss Martin, a word."

Deanna and Marlie left. Deanna patted Luella's shoulder in solidarity before following Marlie out. The door closed behind them. Luella panicked. Why did Snape want to speak to her alone? She did not think this was good news.

Snape regarded her coolly for a while. When he spoke, his voice had slipped back to the soft-spoken sarcasm that struck fear into so many students' hearts.

"Well now, Miss Martin. Our second little chat since your arrival. In rather less happy circumstances. I am very disappointed in you. I had expected better."

Luella said nothing. Snape continued.

"Miss Lovegood it appears was merely swept up by peer pressure and acted as she thought was best. As for Miss Tyler, I am not surprised that she masterminded the whole affair. It appears she has inherited her mother's initiative and willingness to break rules. Not bad things in themselves, but for best use, they require more forethought than she currently possesses. However, as for you..." He looked her straight in the eye, and Luella, for the first time, met his gaze. She was surprised to read there, not just anger, but crushing disappointment.

"I thought you were better than that. Miss Tyler's idea it may have been, but did you have to go along with it?"

Luella felt her earlier guilt hit her again with full force. "I'm sorry, sir." she said quietly.

"So you should be." Snape said, an edge of bitterness creeping into his voice. "I showed concern for you as your teacher and house master, and you took advantage of it for your own personal gain. In the long-term, you will pay for doing this sort of thing, as you alienate potential allies and diminish your own personal power as a result. Your reputation will suffer, as will your own sense of honour, and if you want to achieve your potential, believe me, you will need both to be as strong as they can be. Do you understand me?" His eyes bored into hers. Luella nodded mutely.

"Good." Snape said. "Betray your enemies as you will, but never ever take advantage of a friend or ally. Being a Slytherin does not mean you have to be wholly self-interested. I will not be imposing any further punishment on you, but I wanted you to understand that. Now onto my next point."

He leaned forward at this. Luella sensed a note of urgency creep out.

"What else did you find out? Is there anyone else at Hogwarts that you have information on?" Snape looked keenly at her.

Luella thought for a bit. Should she tell him everything or not? Should she tell him about Mrs. Tyler? She closed her eyes and allowed images to pass through her mind.

She saw Rianne retreating behind her bed curtains and sobbing. Rianne screaming at her sister in the common room. Snape lecturing all three of them on their stupidity. Snape's look of pure disappointment as he lectured her alone. The thought of Deanna going through what Rianne had. Finally, Snape holding Deanna's unmoving Sneakoscope as he was telling Marlie off. These last two decided Luella. She had no wish to see Deanna suffer as well. And whatever else Snape might be, he seemed fundamentally trustworthy.

She opened her eyes. Snape was still looking at her intensely.

"Well, there were a couple of things. One was Marlie's uncle Lucius."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Her uncle? Ah, of course. I had forgotten Narcissa Malfoy was Melissa Lovegood's sister. Although forgivable - I don't believe they've spoken for some time."

"They haven't. I think Mrs. Lovegood arresting her sister's husband may have had something to do with it." Luella grinned.

Snape, for the first time that evening, allowed himself a smile. "Among other things, yes. They never did get on. Does Miss Lovegood know about her uncle's past?"

Luella nodded. "She was the one who found the trial report. She wasn't at all surprised. I don't think you need worry about her."

Snape nodded. "No, probably not. And the other thing?"

Luella gulped nervously. This one was much more worrying. She wasn't sure how Snape would react. Still, nothing for it.

"Well, it was about Deanna's mother." she said, not sure where to start.

Snape started. "What about her?" he said sharply.

"Did you know she was abducted and tortured by Death Eaters?"

"That's in the library?? Where?"

"There's a Ministry report on the incident. Sir, are you alright?" Luella asked, concerned.

"Yes... yes, I'm fine. Have you told anyone else about this?" Snape asked.

Luella shook her head. "No one. I tried to steal the report but it's protected by magic."

Snape raised an eyebrow, but did not look like he was about to tell her off. "Very well, don't worry about it. I shall have it removed from the library. In the mean time, tell no one. Not even your friends Miss Lovegood and Miss Stormosi. I think it would be best if Deanna did not find out about her mother's past just yet. It would unsettle her, and she doesn't need to know. I'm sure her mother will tell her everything when she's

older, but until then... Listen, if there's a risk she might find out too soon, come and find me, alright? Tell me immediately."

"I won't tell anyone, sir. And if she does find out, I'll come straight to you, I promise."

Snape smiled. "Good. You are learning your lesson already. Let us hope you will never have to put it into practice. Was there anything else you uncovered?"

Luella shook her head. "No, the rest was about people we'd never heard of."

Snape seemed content. "Well, in that case, I suggest you return to your dormitory and get some sleep. I think you and I both need it. Goodnight, Miss Martin." He got up and opened the door for her. Luella wished him goodnight and went to leave. However, Snape stopped her as she passed him to go.

"Just one thing. I would like to thank you for trusting me with the information about Deanna. Your honour is not that far gone, I see."

Luella blushed. "Thank you sir. I'm sorry I took advantage of you."

"Apology accepted. Now get to bed. And stay out of trouble, I've had quite enough for one evening."

"I'll try to behave." Luella grinned. And with that, she left Snape's dungeon and returned to the Nest, feeling a lot happier than before.

Deanna and Marlie walked back to the Serpent's Nest together in silence. The air was tangibly uncomfortable. Recent events had pushed their own rift to one side, but having to be alone together, however briefly, had brought it back.

Marlie was first to break the silence.

"I wonder what's happening in there. Poor Lu, I hope she's alright."

Deanna bit her lip. What was Snape up to in there? If Luella was right, and he did know her secret, she could be in real trouble. Concern about Luella's Muggle birth had been a flimsy pretext to start with, she wasn't at all sure how it would stand up to intense scrutiny from someone as skilled at intimidation as Snape.

"Don't know. Hope she's OK. Maybe Snape wants to give her an extra going over, seeing as she was the one who actually did the asking. Don't blame him, I'd go nuts if someone I trusted took advantage like that."

Marlie looked dubious. "Is that all it is, I wonder?" She seemed to be thinking hard. Turning to Deanna, she said sharply "Do you remember when Luella got her wand?"

Now it was Deanna's turn to be suspicious. "What about it?"

"Well," Marlie said slowly, "I was just wondering if your mum told you anything about it. About what it meant."

"Nothing." Deanna said sharply. "She said it was just Luella half-remembering our house emblem. Why, what have you heard?"

"Nothing." Marlie said hastily. "Mum wouldn't say anything, except to say nothing to anyone about it. I was wondering if you knew what it meant."

"Well, as far as I can tell, it's just our respective mothers getting worked up over nothing. Just being paranoid Auror types, seeing Dark magic everywhere. Occupational hazard, comes with the job." Deanna said, trying to sound nonchalant. Marlie was beginning to worry her. Alright, she said she didn't know anything but on the other hand, she would say that, wouldn't she? Marlie was acting very suspiciously, and Deanna, for her part, trusted her as much as she did Snape. Less, in fact.

Marlie fell silent. She looked deep in thought. Deanna decided to leave her alone for now. After all they were nearly at the common room. Snape's office was only down the corridor.

They were interrupted by someone running towards them. It turned out to be Luella.

"Wait up, you two! I've forgotten the password!"

Marlie and Deanna sighed. Luella's memory for passwords was shocking. One reason they rarely let her go wandering around the castle on her own, especially not late at night.

She caught up with them, breathless. They waited while she recovered herself.

"Well?" Marlie asked, curious. "What happened?"

Luella used her breathlessness as an excuse to do some quick thinking. "Not much." she said, leaning against the wall. "Just that he was very disappointed in me, and didn't want to see me lying to teachers and breaking people's trust anymore. He was a bit hacked off with me. Didn't give me any extra punishment though. I was properly remorseful, so I think he felt benevolent."

Deanna smirked. "Told you he liked you. I reckon Snapey's soft on you, mate."

Luella was not pleased. "He is not soft on me, he gave me the roasting to end all roastings. It was horrible. Soft he is not. Let's go in."

Rianne had retreated to bed when they arrived, and they didn't like to disturb her. Marlie just said goodnight and also went straight to bed. Deanna waited until the hangings were closed before dragging Luella over to her bed and drawing her own hangings shut.

"Well? What really happened?" Deanna said quietly. Luella filled her in, leaving out the part about Deanna's mother.

Deanna looked thoughtful. "Snapey seemed rather keen to know what you'd seen, didn't he? Wonder what he's hiding?"

"I wouldn't know, Deanna. You are suspicious, aren't you? He probably wants to know what else we found out in case another incident like tonight happens. He looked absolutely shattered when I left. I for one do not blame him. Would you have wanted to deal with three hysterical Stormosis?"

"No." Deanna admitted. "But I still don't trust him. And here's another one I don't trust either. Marlie."

Luella rolled her eyes. "Deanna, if you're going to go on about her again..."

Deanna shook her head. "No, no, this is genuinely suss." She proceeded to recount what Marlie had said in the corridor.

Luella was troubled by this. She remembered her own conversation with Marlie only a few weeks earlier, and relayed this back to Deanna.

Deanna was jubilant. "See? She is snooping! So what do you reckon she's up to? Do you think she knows?"

"Well I doubt she'd tell you if she did." Luella countered. "But I think her mother must have said something to her. Maybe she wants her to keep an eye on us from a student's point of view. Makes sense, and I wouldn't put it past Mrs. Lovegood to use her own daughter as a spy."

Deanna grinned, delighted at being proved right. "Well, that settles it. We'll have to be careful what we say around her. Make sure she's not reporting our every move back to her mum, or worse, Snape."

Luella, however, had her doubts. "I don't know, I still think she's on our side. I mean, she swore to me on the Great Serpent that she'd do all in her power to help if she could. I think she's trustworthy."

Deanna sneered. "You believed her? Lu, there's plenty of Slytherins who swore oaths on the Great Serpent during the Reign of Terror, that they'd protect their friends and stand firm against Voldy. Then promptly broke them. Branwen Stormosi swore a pact with Mum, Auntie Mel and their other friend Lily Evans on the Great Serpent. Look what happened to her. Words, Lu, that's all the Slytherin Serpent is these days. Trust no one."

Luella sighed. Deanna did have a point, they didn't really know what Marlie's motives were after all. Bidding her goodnight, she slipped out from under the hangings and went to bed.

The fallout from that night's events proved to be less challenging than they expected. Rianne appeared not to bear them any ill-will for what had happened. The rest of the Slytherins had apparently been instructed by either Debra or Snape not to mention anything.

Luella was approached by Lucas Vetinari in the Slytherin common room the following day.

"Luella, is it true? All these rumours flying around, that Rianne's mum's a Death Eater. Please tell me the truth, I almost got in a fight with Winter after he reckoned Rianne was in every way her mother's daughter." He looked slightly desperate.

Luella hung her head. "It's true. Her mother's in Azkaban. Apparently she was spying for Voldemort. Listen, Lucas." she said, ignoring the boy's wince at her mention of Voldemort. "I'd be grateful if you could not mention it to her or anything, she's a bit upset about it all.

Lucas closed his eyes and held himself for a bit. Then he opened them and replied, "OK. Will do. But I wanted you to know, and I'd like it if you could pass this on to her, that I don't think any the worse of her. I still think she's cool, and I don't think she's a Death Eater type. I'll also stop the other lads from saying anything untoward if you like. They'll listen to me. Well, Lynchie and Bryant will anyway. So will Foxy if he knows what's good for him. Don't know about Montague though, but he'll shut up if the rest of us gang up on him."

Luella thanked him gratefully. The last thing Rianne needed was comments in lessons or in the Nest. If all five Slytherin boys were also looking out for her, it vastly lessened the risk of Rianne getting picked on. Rianne seemed comforted by the fact that her fellow first years were all supporting her anyway. In fact, when told that it was Lucas Vetinari that had asked after her and was the one responsible for getting the Slytherin boys onside, Rianne seemed positively cheerful.

"Lucas said that? He really doesn't mind about me?" Rianne seemed amazed, but pleased. "Wonderful! Everyone in the year looks up to him. Aw, that's really nice of him. Guess we Anglo-Italians must stick together." This seemed to work wonders for her mood, and life in the first year girls' dorm began to return to normal.

Even the Weasleys were apparently sorry. It appeared Professor McGonagall had had words with them. They approached the four girls at Sunday dinner, looking rather ashamed. They looked at each other for a bit, shuffled their feet, and coughed nervously before speaking. Fred was first to speak.

"Erm, Rianne, me and George have been thinking, like, and we'd just like to say that we're really sorry about what happened."

"Yeah," George chimed in. "we're really sorry we said that about your mum. We thought you knew, honest. We'd have kept quiet if we'd known you hadn't been told. We hope you're OK and all."

"I've felt better." Rianne said curtly. "Next time, bloody think before you speak."

Fred and George didn't answer, they just stared at the ground and shuffled awkwardly. Marlie spoke, with a distinct air of sarcasm.

"Something else you might like to know. Deanna, Lu and me got the relevant information out of the Restricted Section by lying to Snape. As a result, we've lost thirty house points in total and all three of us are in detention. So you can stop trying to get back those points I lost you, because we're square now. OK?"

Fred and George just mumbled. Fred's ears turned pink. Squirming guiltily, they repeated their apologies and shuffled off. Marlie watched them go coldly.

"They think that an apology will mend the harm they've done?" she said softly. "I won't forgive either of them in a hurry."

"Bear in mind McGonagall probably told them to apologise. Although they did seem genuinely ashamed of themselves." Luella commented.

"So they bloody should be." Deanna snarled. "Thanks to them, we now face the prospect of an evening in Snape's dungeon pickling gods know what and dissecting the most revolting things he can find for us. Cheers, Weasleys."

Rianne waved her hand dismissively. "Forget them. Wasn't their fault. At least they're sorry. Dad should have told me a long time ago." She had a strange, hard look on her face. "I owled him yesterday, sent Barney with the letter. I'm waiting to see what he has to say for himself." Barney was Rianne's pet barn owl.

The girls looked at each other, feeling as awkward as the Weasleys. None of them knew quite what to say to that. The wrath of Rianne was not a pleasant thing to behold, even when directed at somebody else. Luella recalled Snape's words, that Rianne would never be the same again, nor would she ever entirely forgive her father. She began to see what he meant. This was not the same laidback, cool, intellectually curious Rianne she'd known before. This was an entirely different girl, intense, fiercely emotional and very vulnerable. Luella also began to realise what Snape had meant when he'd told them Rianne would need protecting. Not just from those who'd try and take advantage, but in many ways, from herself too. Nothing had been said by any non-Slytherins, all of whom were reacting to Rianne as normal. Evidently Professor Snape was doing a good job of hushing the thing up as far as possible.

Alfredo Stormosi arrived at Hogwarts a few days later. He said the briefest of hellos to Deanna and Luella, greeted Marlie in a slightly more interested manner, before turning to his daughter. Rianne turned away and refused to answer him. The situation could have become very nasty indeed had Professor Snape not materialised out of nowhere with Debra and Kat following him. The Stormosi girls appeared to have patched things up between themselves, as all three of them had been observed gathered together on numerous occasions in a corner of the Nest talking quietly amongst themselves. Rianne later told them that she and Kat had accepted that a five year old Debra had been in no position to argue with her father on the subject, and had acted for the best. However, she had in no way forgiven her father, and the look of

cold anger on her face as she followed her sisters and father to Snape's office spoke volumes about her feelings. She refused to divulge any details about what happened, merely telling her dorm mates that there had been a full and frank exchange of feelings between them and a lot of messy emotional stuff. Luella also noticed that Snape seemed to have aged overnight, looking very weary, with dark circles under his eyes, and snapping at students for the least little thing (although Marlie claimed that this was normal Snape behaviour and nothing to worry about). He was particularly hard on the Weasleys, seemingly blaming them for causing all the trouble. For a change, they seemed to take it lying down, their consciences still troubling them it would seem.

The detentions passed fairly uneventfully. Snape hardly spoke to them, just giving them a crate-load of sheep's eyeballs and a lot of pickling jars, then retreating to his office to let them get on with it. The three girls did not talk much. After a couple of hours, Snape emerged, looking more gaunt and haggard than usual, and told them they could go. Deanna and Marlie went without saying a word. Luella paused, and asked Snape if he was OK.

Snape gazed distantly back at her. Luella felt a wave of real pity at the burnt out look in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded as if it came from far, far away.

"I've felt better. These last few days have been..." He shook himself, and the old Snape re-emerged. He scowled at Luella. "Thank you for your sympathy, Miss Martin, but I do not believe that my feelings are any concern of yours. Certainly they will not improve with your asking." Crushed, Luella followed the others out. She had been hoping that she'd managed to re-establish some kind of trust with Snape. Obviously, it would take much more work than that.

The only positive thing to come out of this was that Deanna and Marlie were talking again. Admittedly not very often, or for very long, but things were improving. Once, Luella had caught them having the beginnings of a proper conversation, before they remembered they were supposed to be enemies and stopped again.

Then, however, came the one thing that could put all the emotional upheaval out of everyone's mind. It was time for the Quidditch season to start.

Chapter Nine: The Seeker Singled Out

The start of the Quidditch season brought an immediate change in the atmosphere at Hogwarts. An air of expectancy settled over everyone. Students suddenly seemed to become very aware of belonging to a house. Those who were actually on the team found themselves virtually deified.

In the Serpent's Nest, it became almost impossible to concentrate on getting any work done. Slytherin, as champions for the past five years running, had a lot to live up to. Moreover, those in the know believed that Slytherin could easily do it again. The other house teams were apparently not up to much. However, Flint was taking no chances, and was putting the entire team through their paces no less than three times a week.

It was now common knowledge among the Slytherins that the new Seeker was to be Marlene Lovegood. Most Slytherins were quite supportive, if rather surprised that a mere first year was considered to be good enough. However, some of the reserves were rather jealous, and insinuations were being made that she was only on the team because she was Mike Lovegood's sister. Not, however, too loudly; Mike was considered to be somewhat over-protective where his sister was concerned.

Lessons with the Gryffindors in particular became very interesting. Gryffindor were the arch rivals of Slytherin and the team was considered by Flint to be the one to beat. The Gryffindors knew this, and the feeling was very much mutual. There was much taunting on both sides, and a lot of punishments were dished out for attempted duelling.

Luella and friends were waiting in the Slytherin corridor outside Snape's classroom, along with the other Slytherins. The Gryffindors were also turning up. It promised to be an interesting Potions class; Snape might not be a Quidditch fan, but there were few more committed to seeing Slytherin win than him. Already there were stories of him docking large amounts of points from Gryffindors with little provocation, and awarding larger than was really justified amounts of points to Slytherins. More stories than usual, in any case.

This didn't seem to bother the Weasley twins, who appeared to have regained their usual ebullient spirits. Fred Weasley lost no time in approaching Marlie.

"Hey, Lovegood, aren't you going to congratulate us?"

"What for?" Marlie said in a tired voice. What with all the Quidditch training, and being forced to work late to catch up on all her homework, she simply wasn't in the mood for the Weasleys' pranks.

"Winning the Quidditch Cup, of course! It's our year this year. We can feel it." George grinned, arriving behind his brother.

Marlie laughed shortly. "Weasley, if you think it's your year, you evidently know very little about Quidditch. Your team blows. Can't see you getting the Cup off us this year."

Both boys raised an eyebrow. "At least we've got all seven players. Got a new Seeker yet?"

Marlie turned to her housemates, rolling her eyes. All eight of them snickered and grinned smugly.

"Oh yes." she said sweetly. "I'd say we've got a decent Seeker alright."

Their conversation was brought to an end by Snape's arrival and the class began. However, that incident was the least worrying one that Luella witnessed. There were a great deal more flare-ups in corridors, some involving hexes being thrown around. A fight between the Weasleys and Deanna ended with Rianne getting hit with a rather nasty boils curse, and Lucas Vetinari having the Jelly-Legs curse thrown at him when he leapt to defend her. George Weasley, however, ended up scratching himself all the way through Charms, while Fred had to put up with blue hair until lunchtime, so Slytherin house honour was generally considered to be satisfied. Deanna emerged unscathed from all of it. She was proving to be quite a competent dueller, and exceptionally good at Charms and Hexes of all kinds. Luella had no doubt she'd make an excellent Auror.

However, it wasn't the nature of the fights that bothered Luella, it was the participants. Slytherins appeared to be involved in the majority of them. And it always seemed to be Slytherins versus either Gryffindors, Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs. Never Gryffindors against Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws, or Hufflepuffs against Ravenclaws. Always the other three houses ganging up against Slytherin.

Rianne seemed unworried by it all. "It's always been that way. We're better than them, so we're hated. They know they've not got a chance against us."

"Yeah, we're the team to beat." Marlie chipped in. "We're the current champions, and the best! Course they hate us."

Luella wasn't convinced. Was this what Mrs. Tyler had meant by Slytherin being considered the evil house? Deanna seemed to think so.

"This is what you're up against, Lu. They'll support anyone to win who isn't Slytherin. Don't trust us at all." Deanna seemed rather fed up.

The first match of the season was Ravenclaw vs. Hufflepuff which Ravenclaw won handsomely. However, the real excitement came three weeks later at Halloween, as Gryffindor squared up to Slytherin. This was the real grudge match, the one that could decide the cup.

Marlene was getting incredibly fractious with everyone. The stress was evidently getting to her. She snapped at people in the common room for the littlest of reasons

and became obsessive about getting homework done. After Luella and Rianne found her in the common room slumped over her books for the third morning in a row, they started giving her a hand with her work to ease the pressure. Even Deanna was supportive, frequently taking Marlene out to the pitch from time to time and helping her practice with some home made Snitches. Relations between them were still fraught, but Deanna appeared to be able to put her house first for once.

Marlene landed her broom after one such impromptu training session, and handed the fake Snitch back to Deanna, who lifted the Levitation Charm she'd put on it. Deanna surveyed her critically.

"You're doing well, Lovegood. I don't know why you're so worried. You've caught it every single time so far."

"Yeah, eventually." Marlene sniffed, trembling. "I took ages on that last one! I won't have time to do it if I've got another Seeker to try against! And no offence Deanna, but this is not the same as catching a real Snitch. I mean, it's a Transfigured ping pong ball with a Levitation Charm on it, for gods' sake." She indicated the Snitch dismissively.

Deanna looked hurt. "It's not that bad. Anyway, it'll do. Besides, you've had practice games against the reserves! You've won them all so far. You'll be fine. I promise you, once you're out there on that broom, you'll wonder what you were ever worrying about."

Marlene refused to be consoled. "Playing the reserves isn't the same as playing the Gryffindor first team! They're really good! And the entire school will be watching!" she howled.

Deanna sighed. "OK. Be like that. But you've trained hard, haven't you? You've been practising, haven't you? You can fly like that crow of Snape's with a rocket up it."

Marlene giggled at that. "He'd kill us if we did that to it. Shall we kidnap it and do a comparison?"

Deanna grinned. "Nice idea, but I think we'd better lie low around Snape for a bit. Stay out of trouble. Now, we've got a good hour before dinner. Let's try you with a bit of competitive Seeking. I'm off to get a school broom, then we'll compete to get the Snitch. OK?"

Marlene nodded. She seemed less tense than before. And she was able to beat Deanna to the Snitch more often than not. But as she later said to Rianne, Deanna wasn't the Gryffindor Seeker...

Saturday brought with it a fine, clear day. Perfect Quidditch weather, as Flint kept commenting. He'd decided that the team should sit together at breakfast, have a bit of team bonding beforehand. Marlene sat next to her brother, picking at her food. She was far too nervous to actually eat anything. On her other side, Kat seemed distant, as if she was thinking of something else. Flint was telling her off for it.

"Stormer, I hope you're going to be a little more aware during the match than you are at the moment. That's the third time I've asked you to pass the bread rolls." Flint sounded on edge.

Kat started. "Sorry, Marcus. I've had... things on my mind."

Flint was a little less than understanding. "Well, you can have things on your mind all you like when you're not playing. But when you're on that broom, Chasing for Slytherin, I want your mind focused on that Quaffle, and getting it through them hoops. Alright?"

"Alright, alright." Kat snapped. "I'm focused." However, she gave him dark looks throughout the meal.

"Mike," Marlie asked, "how dangerous is Quidditch really?"

Mike turned away from telling Jordan a joke about a midget and three nuns. "Dangerous?" he grinned. "Oh yeah, it's terrible. Bludgers everywhere, fouls, falling off brooms, it's great. So many cool ways to get yourself killed. I'll tell ya, Marls, until you've almost been knocked off your broom by an opposing player or been hit by a Bludger, you haven't lived."

"Mike!" squealed Marlie. "Stop it, you're scaring me! I'll tell Mum!"

The threat of a Howler from Mrs. Lovegood did not appeal. Mike shut up, and tried to reassure his sister.

"Just kidding, our kid. It's not really that dangerous. Me and Flinty will keep the Bludgers away from you, and the other players will be too focused on the Quaffle to bother about you. Keep out of the fray if you can, and just keep an eye on the Snitch, and you'll be fine. No one's ever died playing Quidditch. Well, not at Hogwarts anyway. We'll beat Gryffindor, don't you worry. You just keep your mind on the Snitch." He patted her confidently on the shoulder. Marlene smiled weakly. All very well for him, Beaters didn't decide games.

Further down the table, Luella, Rianne and Deanna were eating their own breakfasts. Luella kept glancing in Marlie's direction.

"Do you reckon she's OK?" she asked nervously.

Deanna was dismissive. "She'll be fine. She's a genuinely good flier. We'll win. We have to. We are the mighty Verts-et-Argents!" She raised her voice into a triumphant yell. The other tables looked dismissive. Several other Slytherins laughed and raised their glasses. Lucas Vetinari began to lead a chant.

*"The mighty Verts-et-Argents are we,
The backs of our brooms is all you'll see.
No one else can ever compare,
Enemies of the Heir, beware!"*

Other Slytherins joined in and the last line was taken up by virtually all of them. Luella was left confused.

"What was that?" she asked, bemused.

"Slytherin war chant. Although the second line's been adapted for Quidditch purposes, it used to be 'the flash of our wands is all they'll see'." Rianne told her, flushed and exhilarated.

"What about that last line though? Enemies of the Heir, beware?" For some reason, it sounded familiar.

Rianne was ever keen to explain these things. "Refers to the Heir of Slytherin. The one who will restore Slytherin to greatness and rid the world of Slytherin's enemies. Well, it should be Heirs of Slytherin really. There'll be two of them. A Destroyer and a Redeemer. We reckon the Destroyer was You-Know-Who, but there's still a Redeemer left to chant about!" Her face shone with delight.

Luella smiled weakly. Deanna patted her hand gently. "Don't worry." she whispered, "Hopefully, you won't be asked to lead Slytherin to victory, trampling all it's enemies into the dust."

"As long as flying's not involved, I don't care." Luella muttered back. Deanna chuckled and buttered her croissant.

However, Luella was worried. It was a little disturbing to hear what the Slytherins expected of their Redeemer. She hadn't thought it'd be so militaristic. The "Enemies of the Heir" bit sounded like the sort of thing Voldemort would use. She didn't want to defeat him just to end up as feared as he'd been.

At length, breakfast ended and everyone filed out to the Quidditch pitch. As they took their seats in the stands, Luella gasped to see how high up they were. Suddenly, she felt very relieved that she wasn't playing, and completely understanding of why Marlie had been so worried.

She turned to talk to Deanna, and noticed that she, Rianne, Chris Bryant and Lucas Vetinari were struggling with a huge roll of canvas.

"Er... Dee, what are you doing?" Luella asked.

Deanna grinned. "Well, we saw how nervous Marlie was, so we thought we'd give her a bit of a confidence boost. We've been working on this in our spare time, all four of us." They finally managed to get the thing unrolled, with a bit of help from one of Deanna's Levitation Charms. It proved to be a huge green banner with two Slytherin Serpents, one running along the top, the other from the bottom. They were very well drawn, with a precision that made it look as if they were alive. A closer look revealed that they were actually moving.

"Good isn't it?" Deanna grinned. "Rianne and Lucas did the Serpents. Chris painted the lettering and the background on. The Animation Charms were my handiwork. Like it?"

"I don't see any lettering, Deanna." Luella pointed out.

"Oh, of course! Silly me." Deanna tapped the banner with her wand, and the words "Go, Marlie!" unfurled onto the banner. She tapped it again, and the letters changed to "Go, Slytherin!". Then "Verts-et-Argents!", "Come on you Greens!", "Nice Score!", "Rubbish!", "Foul!", "Great Capture!", "Victory!" and "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!"

"Isn't it wonderful?" Deanna sighed. "We amaze ourselves."

Luella was, despite herself, very impressed. "It's fantastic! I had no idea we had such talented artists in our House. Nice Charm work too. How did you get that good?"

"How indeed."

As one, they turned to see Snape standing over them. However, he did not look displeased with their efforts.

"Your handiwork amazes me. I hope your studies have not been neglected as a result." Snape said, not unkindly.

Lucas replied, with more than a hint of irony. "Oh, of course not, sir. We'd never neglect our homework, would we folks?" A chorus of nos followed.

Snape seemed pleased. "Well, I am very glad to see you are all getting behind your housemate. Who did the banner?"

Deanna gleefully explained who did what, being sure to emphasise her own role in enchanting it. She gave another demonstration of the various phrases it had in it. Snape appeared highly impressed, although he was trying not to show it.

"Ten points to Slytherin for all your hard work. Let us hope it inspires our team to great things." And with that, he took his seat in the front row with the Slytherin Prefects.

Luella raised an eyebrow at Deanna. "He's in a good mood, isn't he?"

Deanna shrugged. "Of course he is. We're going to win." She turned to face the pitch. "How I love the smell of victory in the morning..."

It was at that moment that Madam Hooch led the players onto the pitch, the Gryffindors in red robes with golden sashes, the Slytherins in their traditional Green and Silver. Luella couldn't help noticing how small Marlie looked next to the others. Next to her, Deanna was producing the "Go Marlie!" phrase on the banner, while Rianne was screaming "Come on, Marlie!" Marlene actually glanced up at them, saw

the banner and waved. Luella couldn't see the expression on her face, but she was glad she'd seen the banner.

The announcer, a Ravenclaw, was calling out the names of the teams, as they did in the professional matches.

"For Gryffindor, let me welcome Oliver Wood! Don Adams! Tony Pearson! Maggie Moran! Kelly Darin! Matt Dyson! Aaaaand... Lisa Jones!" The Gryffindors went wild. Some of them had drawn banners too, although none so fine as the Slytherin banner. Luella felt a distinct feeling of superiority at this. Then came the names the Slytherins had been waiting for.

"And for Slytherin, give a big hand to Jordan Foxworth! Marcus Flint! Mike Lovegood! Summer Montague! Kat Stormosi! Laetitia Vetinari! Aaaand... Marlie Lovegood!"

The Slytherins howled with delight. Luella heard Winter, Lucas, Geoff and Rianne all pointing out their star siblings with glee. All round her were cheers and cries of support. The banner now read "Come on you Greens!" Luella glanced at the other houses. They all appeared to be dumbstruck that the Slytherins were fielding a first year as their seeker. Certainly they weren't cheering much. But then, when Slytherin was concerned, they never did.

Behind her, Luella heard Winter Montague yelling "Enemies of the Heir, beware! Come on, Summer! Come on, Marlie!" The banner changed to read "Go Slytherin!" as the teams kicked off. Gryffindor grabbed the ball first and headed towards the Slytherin end. Until a Bludger almost unseated Darin, causing her to drop the Quaffle. Laetitia snatched it out of the air, mouthing "Thanks!" at Darin and Adams, one of the Beaters. Laetitia swerved past Moran, narrowly avoided a Bludger sent her way by Pearson and passed to Summer who caught it neatly, but nearly dropped it again as Flint zoomed past her to get rid of a Bludger she'd not noticed. Bewildered, Summer didn't react as Dyson snatched it from her grasp and made a dash for the other end. The Slytherins groaned. They'd almost had it then! Dyson to Moran as a Bludger shot his way, then Moran made a shot for goal... And promptly saw the Quaffle snatched up by Jordan who passed it back to Kat.

Meanwhile Marlie was circling above the fray, scanning the area frantically for any sign of the Snitch and desperately trying to remember some of the Quidditch moves Mike had told her about. No sign of the Snitch anywhere. Not far away, the Gryffindor Seeker, Jones, was also watching carefully.

A cheer went up from the green end. Laetitia had scored. Marlie clapped and returned to circling, when she was suddenly distracted by a blonde and green blur rushing towards her. Seconds later, a bat connected with the Bludger that was on a collision course with her head, sending it spiralling away towards a Gryffindor Chaser.

"Watch out for them, Marlie! That one nearly had you!" Mike called out, before returning to keep an eye out for Bludgers. Marlie nodded weakly. That Bludger could easily have killed her. She felt her knees turn to water, and gripped the broom tightly. Then she suddenly realised that Jones had vanished. Next thing, she registered the

Gryffindor heading for a small glimmer near the Slytherin end. Hastily, Marlie immediately pursued her. She couldn't let Gryffindor get to it so soon, not on her first game. "Come on!" she hissed, pushing her Cleansweep to the limit. Both spectators and players paused to watch the chase. Except for Mike, who had the presence of mind to hit a Bludger towards Jones. She swerved to avoid it, then turned again to go for the Snitch. But it had disappeared. Marlie halted her own broom and got out of the way. Taking advantage of the pause, Kat snatched the Quaffle out of Moran's arms and scored with it. Another cheer from the Slytherins. Twenty-nil to the Greens.

Marlie noticed the banner with "Go Marlie!" on it again. Deanna, Rianne and Luella were among those holding it up. Mustn't disappoint, she thought to herself. Then it changed to "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!" The "Enemies of the Heir" bit rolled on first then disappeared to make way for the word "Beware!" which flashed several times. The sequence then kept repeating. Marlie raised an eyebrow. Deanna was the only one competent enough at Charms to manage that, but surely she wouldn't have gone to all that trouble for her? Marlie was about to return her attention to the game, when she noticed a glimmer above the banner that was nothing to do with the Slytherin Serpents. She glanced at Jones, who appeared to have noticed nothing. The rest of the players were all down at the Gryffindor end, where Summer was taking a penalty.

Marlie spun her broom round and shot straight for the Slytherin stands. Before her, Slytherins suddenly noticed her approach, screamed and dived to the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Snape snarling at her and Deanna screaming something. However, all her attention was focused on the hovering gleaming object in front of her. There was no doubting it, it was the Snitch. Praying she wouldn't crash into the stands, she lifted her broom at the last moment, and grabbed the Snitch as she flew past. Up she went, then levelled off. Gazing at the Snitch, still struggling in her hand, it suddenly dawned on her. She'd done it! It was hers! The game was less than twenty minutes old, and she'd got the Snitch! It was all over. Joyously, she screamed to the Slytherins below her "I GOT IT!! LOOK!!"

The Slytherins emerged from beneath their seats to see what the fuss was about. She held the Snitch up for them to see and circled above the first years, crying out "I got it, I got it! We won!" Comprehension began to dawn on the upturned Slytherin faces, as people suddenly began jumping up and down, hugging each other and screaming. Marlie, tears rolling down her cheeks, flew over Luella, Deanna and Rianne, who were all three clutching each other and shouting. Deanna was yelling "See? Told you you could do it!" Rianne and Luella just grabbed each other and smiled like mad.

The rest of the team had finally cottoned on to what had happened and were racing over to congratulate her. Mike grabbed his sister round the waist and kissed her on the cheek before proclaiming to anyone who would listen "That's my sister, that is!" The team hugged each other in a circle and sank gratefully to the floor of the arena. The green area was going crazy, the banner flashing alternately between "Great Capture!", "Victory!", "Enemies of the Heir" and "Go Marlie!". Even Snape looked pleased, although he wasn't clapping, just standing with his arms folded, smiling. The rest of the crowd looked rather less pleased. They'd wanted Gryffindor to win. The Gryffindor end was silent. Their team was also landing, their faces gloomy. Marlie was too ecstatic to care. 180 to nil was a pretty good score any day, but against the old

enemy, it was even sweeter. Potions on Monday had never looked like being more fun. Marlie glanced at the downcast Gryffindor crowd. The Weasley twins were in the middle, immediately recognisable by their red hair. Marlie, even at this distance, could see their looks of uncomprehending shock. She waved, blew a kiss, then dropped a mock curtsy before heading off to join the rest of the team.

The rest of the day proved a blur. A party soon got into full swing in the Serpent's Nest, with food swiped from the kitchens and more than a few practical jokes being played. The banner was now decorating the Slytherin common room, and was attracting plenty of admiring looks. No one could believe that first years had come up with it.

"It seems our newbies are determined to distinguish themselves!" Debra said warmly. "First Marlie Lovegood wins the match against our arch-rivals for us," here she paused to allow for more cheering and ruffling of Marlie's hair, "then Deanna Tyler, Rianne, Lucas Vetinari and Chris Bryant come up with this. I'm very proud of all you. You five, have a house point each for your talent."

Rianne started to say "But Professor Snape - " before Deanna kicked her sharply on the ankle, and profusely thanked Debra for her kindness.

Marlie was thoroughly over excited by it all, and was busy enthusing to Luella. "I can't believe it, I just can't! I caught the Snitch, on my first game ever! Oh my gods, I don't believe I did it!"

"Well... you did! Congratulations, mate!" Luella grinned back.

"Ohh... thank you!" Marlie cried, hugging her.

A soft voice said behind her, "You most certainly did, Miss Lovegood. However, do try not to crash into the stands next time, you'll get yourself thrown off the team."

Marlie turned. It was Snape. She went a bit pale with fright; Snape had that effect on her.

"You... you're not going to throw me off the team, are you? I mean," she stammered, "I didn't mean to nearly crash into the stands, honest! I wasn't showing off or anything, I just saw the Snitch there and... and..."

Snape silenced her with a wave of his hand. "I have no intention of taking you off the team. In fact, I wish to congratulate you on a very skilful bit of flying and a most daring capture. However, given that I have no wish to scrape you and whoever else you've managed to kill off the stands, I'd like to ask you not to repeat it. Or if you must frighten us all like that, could you at least aim for a different house?" Snape said, amused.

Marlie blushed and giggled. "I'll try, sir. 180 to nil though, weren't we good?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed you were. I am very proud of all of you. A toast to our glorious team!" They all drank to the team members who just grinned. Snape then commented on the banner.

"Ah yes, I see our first year supporters club has decided to exhibit their handiwork for all to see. Well worth the ten points I awarded earlier."

Debra was outraged. "You mean, you already gave them... Tyler! Stormosi! Vetinari! Bryant! Five points off Slytherin for not telling me that! Sneaky little... oooh!"

Snape said nothing, simply casting Deanna an amused look that left Deanna in no doubt as to who he thought responsible for keeping quiet. Instead, he just said to her, "I take it this is to be a permanent feature of the Nest now?"

"Well, we hadn't thought of that... but why not? It can be a house heirloom. Future generations of Slytherins can take it to their Quidditch games and use it to inspire their team on to victory. Long after they've all forgotten who Marlie is." Deanna was getting carried away.

"So never, then." said a proud Mike. Marlie went red and turned away. She came face to face with Dexter Crabbe, the reserve Seeker who'd been one of those muttering in corners about how Marlie owed her place on the team to nepotism. He looked like he was forcing himself to grin.

"Well, Lovegood, got to hand it to you, you played an amazing game. I'd like to say how sorry I am that I ever suspected you of using your family connections to get on the team." Again that same forced grin.

Marlie wasn't sure how to react. "Er... thank you." She wasn't sure what to say and the big fifth year was scaring her.

Crabbe had two glasses of pumpkin juice in his hands. "How about we drink a toast? To your future as a Seeker." He handed her a glass. Not knowing what to do and not wanting to appear rude, Marlie drank. Crabbe grinned again, patted her on the shoulder and left.

Luella had watched that exchange and went over to Marlie, concerned. There was something very suspicious about the reserve Seeker's behaviour.

"What was that about, Marlie?" she asked.

Marlie shook her head. "Don't know. Just wanted to congratulate me and drink a toast. He's freaking me out though. Just seemed really weird. Oh well." She shrugged it off. Before Luella could say anymore, Deanna interrupted with a tray of drinks.

"Move over, Rover, Tyler's comin' over!" she announced theatrically. "A toast to our wonderful Seeker!" She passed out glasses and drank hers in one. Luella also drank. Marlie however remained still. She had a look of deep suspicion on her face.

"Well, now, here's a turn up for the books. Deanna Tyler saying something nice about me. Only a few weeks ago I was a nepotistic, crawling, teacher's pet. Now I'm a star, I'm everyone's favourite Slytherin all of a sudden."

Deanna coughed, embarrassed. She shuffled her feet awkwardly. "Ah, yes, well. Er, I was meaning to talk to you about that. Listen, about that fight we had... Look, I'm sorry I accused of you of crawling your way onto the team. And I'm sorry I slapped you. It was uncalled for, and I'm sorry. You're a terrific Seeker, and that was an amazing bit of flying today, even if you did nearly kill us all."

Marlene looked surprised, and rather smug. An apology from Deanna was not a common occurrence. However, Marlie's expression then softened.

"Alright, I forgive you. I shouldn't have said that about your mum either, that was right out of line. And... I wanted to thank you for doing the extra training with me, and knocking out those fake Snitches. And telling me I could do it. I couldn't have done it without you."

Deanna and Marlie were looking at each other, if not with affection then certainly with respect. Deanna held out her hand.

"Peace?"

Marlie smiled and took it. "Peace." She drank her own pumpkin juice. Luella smiled. One less thing to worry about.

Marlie then made her way over to Rianne, Chris and Lucas, who were admiring the banner.

"I'd also like to thank you four for this amazing banner! It's wonderful! Plus I wouldn't have seen the Snitch without it."

Lucas and Rianne hugged her, while Chris shuffled shyly around. Luella wandered off and left them to it.

Monday afternoon found all the Slytherin first year in a state of high excitement. Last thing on Mondays was Potions with Snape... and the Gryffindors. Deanna had been preparing for this for some time. Not, however, by doing much in the way of homework. First she'd pushed Chris into adding the 180-nil scoreline to the banner. Next, a reduction charm had shrunk it to a more manageable size. Finally, Deanna had attached it to her bag so it could be easily demonstrated to any passing Gryffindors. So far it had attracted a few dark looks and mutterings, but very little actual action. Deanna's reputation as a star dueller had spread.

The other Slytherins, however, were very impressed. Alex Lynch in particular was giving it some very admiring looks. The Gryffindors said nothing. The Weasleys and their friend Lee Jordan glared at Deanna with barely concealed hatred. Deanna just grinned smugly.

Marlie turned up and promptly caused even more annoyance to the waiting Gryffindors. The Slytherins immediately began cheering her. Some were even prostrating themselves before her. Lucas and Deanna were both shouting "Make way for the Quidditch Queen! All Hail Queen Marlie!" Marlie blushed, embarrassed.

"Stop it, you lot. You're embarrassing me." she said roughly. Marlie had not been feeling well since the previous evening. She rubbed her head, squinting painfully. She was rather glad it was dark down here, it was easier on her eyes. If only it were warmer. She shivered, despite the sweat on her skin. This did not stop her from getting patted on the back, having her hair ruffled and generally being made a fuss of by her housemates.

Things were not improved by Winter and Geoff presenting the Weasleys with a small wooden coffin they'd made.

"We got you this, boys. Thought you might need it." Winter grinned evilly.

"Why's that." Fred said grumpily.

"It's for your chances of winning the Quidditch Cup this year. Seeing as they're now officially dead and all." Geoff said, provoking much laughter from the Slytherins.

Rianne inspected it. "It's not very big."

"Neither were their chances of winning the Cup." Deanna said. The Slytherins howled with laughter at this point. Fred angrily knocked the coffin out of Winter's hands and stepped on it.

They were distracted by Snape's approach. "What is all this merriment? I had no idea you all looked forward to your classes so much."

Lucas answered him. "We were offering the Gryffindors our condolences on Saturday's game, sir." Behind Snape's back, Deanna held up her bag with the 180-nil scoreline flashing across it, poking her tongue out at the fuming Gryffindors.

Snape allowed the faintest glimmer of a smile to flicker across his face. "I see. Very noble of you, Vetinari. Miss Tyler, what exactly are you doing?" He had noticed Deanna waving her bag around out of the corner of his eye.

Deanna immediately stopped cavorting. "It's the banner, sir. We've added a new phrase to it. I was just demonstrating to the Gryffindors how it worked, sir."

Snape idly glanced at it. "Interesting. But I believe Reduction Charms are second year magic?"

Deanna blushed. "Well, they are. I looked them up in the library specially and I've been practising them."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Such devotion to your magical studies should be rewarded. Five points to Slytherin. I hope you will show such efforts in all your

subjects." And with that, he led them into his classroom. The Gryffindors were left open-mouthed and outraged. They all knew that Professor McGonagall would never have given them house points for taunting their rivals. Sulking, they followed the jubilant Slytherins into the classroom. As they filed in, Snape noticed the remains of the wooden coffin lying on the corridor floor.

"Whose mess is that?" he snapped.

"Fred Weasley's, sir." Deanna promptly answered. Snape flicked an impatient glare at Fred.

"Clear it up, Weasley. And five points from Gryffindor for littering."

Fred looked furious, but did as he was told. The class settled down to work.

Sat at the back, next to Rianne, Marlie was beginning to feel distinctly unwell. She'd been feeling rough Sunday night, but had put it down to a late night and all the excitement of Saturday. Now, however, she was feeling much worse. She rubbed her head again and held herself. How on earth she was going to survive Potions like this, she didn't know. She just hoped that Snape would have them doing anti-fever potions.

"Are you alright, Marlie?" Rianne asked, concerned. Marlie looked very pale and shaky. There were dark circles under her eyes.

Marlie nodded weakly. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. Just due to all the excitement."

Rianne was not convinced. "Marlie, you look awful. Go and see Madam Pomfrey. I'm sure Snape will let you leave the lesson. After Saturday, you're probably his favourite Slytherin at the moment."

Snape heard them talking. "Misses Stormosi and Lovegood, if what you have to say is so important, maybe you would like to share it with the rest of the class."

Rianne spoke up fearlessly. "I was just telling Marlie she should go to the hospital wing. She doesn't look well, does she sir?"

Snape regarded Marlie carefully. He obviously shared Rianne's views, as he appeared rather concerned himself.

"Miss Lovegood, you do appear less than healthy. If you wish to go the hospital wing, you may be excused."

Marlie shook her head. "It's nothing, sir. I'm fine. Just tired out by all the excitement on Saturday." She forced what she hoped was a smile.

Snape did not look convinced, but decided not to force the issue. "Well, if you're sure... If you do feel ill, you have my permission to leave if you wish." He returned to writing on the board. Fred and George Weasley stared at her open-mouthed. Someone

actually had a legitimate reason and Snape's permission to leave Potions and didn't take it? Their minds boggled in amazement. Marlie must be ill.

As the lesson progressed, Rianne and Snape's fears over Marlie's health began to materialise. Marlie was very distant while brewing up her Luck Potion. The fumes from the cauldron were beginning to make her dizzy, and she found it increasingly difficult to slice up her newt tails. Hazily, she looked around. The candle lights were hurting her eyes and the room was starting to sway. She was vaguely aware of voices around her, and Rianne asking her something, but she seemed to be far away and talking very slowly. She was suddenly aware that all she really wanted to do was sleep. Mmm... sleep. Just close her eyes and drift slowly into sleep...

Rianne shrieked as Marlie suddenly slumped forward over the desk, then slid slowly to the floor. Leaping back, she looked down at her friend, horrified. Marlie was spreadeagled on the floor, limbs akimbo, her eyes fluttering as if she was struggling to keep them open. Her pupils seemed dilated and her breathing was shallow.

Snape was on the scene almost immediately. Kneeling down next to the fallen Slytherin, he began taking her pulse and checking her breathing. Looking up at an equally stunned Fred Weasley, he snarled "What have you done to her, Weasley?"

Fred was indignant. "I haven't done anything to her!"

Rianne composed herself. "It wasn't him, sir. She's been feeling rough since yesterday, really tired and sleepy, and running a temperature. I've been telling her to go see Madam Pomfrey, but she wouldn't."

Snape had returned his attention to Marlie. He looked concerned. "This is not a good sign, I have seen these symptoms before... You say she started feeling ill yesterday?"

Deanna and Luella had by this time made their way over.

"Since dinner." Rianne said, still in shock.

Luella knelt next to Marlie, and gently stroked her face. Marlie's skin was covered in sweat, yet horribly cold to the touch. Luella shivered.

"Will she be OK, sir?" she whispered. "I mean, she will be alright, won't she?"

Snape didn't answer. He merely conjured up a stretcher with a wave of his wand and levitated Marlie onto it.

"She needs to go the hospital wing immediately. I may be some time." He hesitated. "All of you, pack up your things. We will resume this next lesson. In the mean time take notes on Luck Potions, their effects and possible uses from your textbook." He turned to the three Slytherin girls as the rest of the class packed their things up. "You three had better come to the hospital wing as soon as you can. This is very serious." Turning back to Marlie, he produced a small vial from his robes and administered some drops to her. She didn't respond.

"An all-purpose antidote I always carry with me. It will help her, I think."

Deanna gasped. "You don't think she's been poisoned?"

"It's possible. Indeed, likely. But I need to check with Madam Pomfrey first. Come. She needs help."

Chapter Ten: Sleeping Death

The three of them waited in the hospital wing for what seemed like hours. Marlie had been carted off into a quiet corner immediately on arrival, and was now hidden behind screens. Snape and Madam Pomfrey had disappeared behind them and were talking in hushed tones. Luella caught snatches of words, none of which sounded very encouraging. Madam Pomfrey was heard to gasp "Sleeping Death? But how on earth did a student get hold of that?" Snape's reply was unintelligible, but the tone of his voice was very serious.

At length, the screens were pulled back. Snape came out, while Madam Pomfrey remained tending to Marlene. The girls immediately rushed towards him, desperate for news.

"Well? Will she be OK?" "What's wrong with her?" "Is it serious?"

Snape silenced them with a wave of his hand. "Patience. I will explain all. I need to return to my office to obtain more antidote, perhaps you would be so good as to come with me? I would prefer to talk somewhere a little more private." He indicated the students in there for various ailments, magical and otherwise, all of whom had been observing the comings and goings with great interest.

They followed him in silence. Snape's facial expression did not look encouraging. On reaching his office, they took their seats. At least this time they weren't in trouble. Luella thought of Marlie lying half-conscious on the floor, looking so pale and weak, and shivered. She'd gladly trade away Slytherin's entire points total and do five detentions to have Marlie healthy again.

Rianne spoke first. "Well, how is she? Will she be OK?" Her voice trembled and she looked worried sick.

Snape looked very grave, and there was more than a hint of sadness in his eyes. "At this stage, I cannot say. She is very ill indeed. I do not know how things will turn out. However, she is young, strong and healthy, she has a fighting chance." He fell silent, unable to speak for a few moments. Deanna, wide-eyed, articulated what they were all thinking.

"Sir, she will... she will be OK, won't she? I mean, she's not..." She gulped. "She's not going to die, is she?"

Luella tensed. Reaching out for Deanna's hand, she realised that Deanna was also poised, awaiting his response. Snape looked at them with that same sad, serious expression.

"Yes, Miss Tyler, I'm afraid she could. She is very seriously ill."

Deanna stared back in shock. "No... she can't. She can't!" she howled before bursting into tears. Luella put her arms round her. Rianne looked impassive, but Luella recognised the look in her eyes. It was the same look she'd had after the family confrontation with her father.

"What's wrong with her, Professor?" Rianne asked. Her voice sounded calm.

Deanna raised her eyes, tears streaming down her face. "She can't die, she can't!" she sobbed. "We've only just patched things up between us, she can't die now! She's only a kid, it's not her time yet, it can't be..." She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Oh gods, suppose I helped cause it? She's been under so much stress lately, with Quidditch and study and fighting with me, of course she's vulnerable to disease. Gods, it's all my fault!" Her voice broke on the last word and she began crying again. Luella just hugged her friend, who buried her head on her shoulder.

Snape looked sympathetic, but his voice sounded a little harsh. "Calm yourself, Miss Tyler. For your information, I very much doubt your friend's condition was caused by the stress she was under, although it may have weakened her immune system in the short-term. Miss Stormosi, you asked me what is wrong with her. Have any of you ever heard of the potion called Sleeping Death?"

Rianne immediately started. "Sleeping Death? Wasn't that a particularly virulent cross between a Sleeping Potion, a mushroom with hallucinogenic effects and a deadly poison invented by You-Know-Who?"

Snape nodded. "Your general knowledge is to be commended. Yes it was invented during the Reign of Terror as an extra-strong Sleeping Potion mixed with poison and various psychotropic medicines. Its main effect is to cause the victim to become wearier and wearier until they fall asleep. If they are lucky, they eventually wake up. If they are not..." He let them fill in the blanks.

Luella's eyes widened. "You mean they just go on sleeping?"

Snape shook his head. "If only it were that easy. They do sleep, but it's a troubled, feverish sleep, with vivid, delirious nightmares. It's agony, hearing someone affected by it, hearing them scream in their sleep, unable to wake up. Eventually they grow weaker and weaker until they die. It is a most deadly brew, with no known cure. All that can be done is to administer all-purpose antidotes and hope the person finds the strength to fight it and wake. Very popular with the Death Eaters, that." Bitterness drenched his every word.

Rianne spoke in a hushed voice. "And someone's slipped that to Marlie?"

Snape nodded. "I have seen it in action before, there is little doubt. My own mother was a victim. I know the signs well enough. She has been poisoned."

Luella spoke timidly. "But something like Sleeping Death, isn't it illegal?"

Snape laughed hollowly. "Of course. Brewing and possessing it without a licence are illegal, and licences are issued under very strict regulations. Administering it to a human being will earn you a life sentence in Azkaban. It is incredibly dangerous and very potent. It only takes a few drops to affect someone."

"So if it's so dangerous and illegal, what's it doing in Hogwarts?" Rianne asked sharply.

"And who'd want to poison Marlie, she's just a kid!" Luella said, horrified.

"Who indeed." Snape said shortly. "This is where you three come in."

All three went pale. Deanna stopped crying at once. She looked particularly concerned.

"Sir, you surely don't think... I mean, it wasn't one of us!" She looked panicky.

Snape allowed himself a wry smile. "No, I don't believe it was one of you. Sleeping Death is a particularly complicated potion, it is beyond any of your capabilities. Even you, Miss Stormosi, could not brew Sleeping Death."

Deanna seemed rather relieved at this. Luella asked "So who could brew it, then?"

"Well, I believe it is not beyond the capability of some of my older students. And the recipe is in the Restricted Section. Certainly some of my fifth, sixth and seventh years would be up to it." He leaned forward. "Listen carefully, all of you. Sleeping Death takes 24 hours to begin working, and approximately 48 hours for the sleep to begin. Miss Lovegood collapsed this afternoon, and you say she first began feeling ill Sunday evening, yes?"

They nodded. Snape looked thoughtful. "So she must have imbibed the potion Saturday afternoon or evening. Where was she then?"

"With us." Rianne said promptly. "It was after the match, she was at the party in the common room virtually all day, except for lunchtime, and the Halloween Feast."

Luella gasped. "But that means... she must have poisoned by a Slytherin, there was no one else near her all day!"

Deanna gave a short, hollow laugh, much like Snape's earlier. "Yeah, and? Trust me, if you're looking for someone to stab you in the back, look no further than Slytherin House. At least Gryffindors are honest when they hate you."

Snape was stroking his chin idly. "Sleeping Death can be prepared either as a powder which is sprinkled over the target's food, or as a liquid which is added to their drink."

So what did she eat and drink on Saturday, and more importantly, who gave it to her?"

Luella thought hard. "She ate at the Slytherin table at lunch and the Feast. But she had one of us on each side and opposite her, plus the Quidditch team were all around her. So not then."

"There was food at the party too." added Deanna. "But it was all on communal trays. They couldn't have poisoned that, it would have affected us all. And they wouldn't be able to poison food she was actually holding in her hand. Ditto the drinks, they were all in jugs, you had to pour your own."

"But did she, though?" Snape mused. "Easily, someone could have poured a drink for her while she wasn't looking and administered the potion before serving it to her. Who offered her a pre-poured drink?"

Rianne and Luella both turned to look at a now trembling Deanna. "I did, sir." she whispered. "I poured drinks for Lu, Marlie and me so we could drink a toast. But I didn't add poison to them!" she insisted. "I never took my eyes off them either!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No one is suggesting you poisoned her, Miss Tyler. However, your immediate suspicion that we might is interesting."

Deanna shook her head, frightened. "Well, I know we didn't get on, but... I didn't want her dead! Not after seeing her fly like that."

Rianne spoke up softly. "Deanna, you couldn't possibly have poisoned her. You poured the drinks but you didn't hand them out, did you? You just offered a tray and let everyone choose their own. In fact, you let Lu and Marlie choose first, didn't you?"

Deanna nodded. "Yes, but..."

"So," Rianne explained patiently, "if you had poisoned one, you'd have been sure to offer it to Marlie, wouldn't you? At the very least you'd have been sure to take a clean one. If someone had wanted to poison one of those, they'd have had to poison one and risk the wrong person getting sick, or poison all three and have all of you suffer. You two are OK, so those drinks were in all probability clean."

Deanna looked very relieved to be off the hook. Snape was also pleased.

"Miss Stormosi, your powers of reasoning impress even me. I hope you will put them to good use in finding out who poisoned your friend."

Luella was also thinking. Who else? Who else had offered Marlie a drink that day? And then it came to her.

"Dexter Crabbe." she said, suddenly. "He got her a drink. Wanted to drink her health. I saw him do it. He looked really weird at the time. Like he was up to something. Marlie didn't trust him either, although she still drank her drink."

"Little fool." Deanna snarled. "Mel Lovegood for a mother, and she drinks something offered by someone she doesn't trust? Didn't her mother teach her anything?"

"She was just trying to be polite." Luella said meekly.

"And look where it's got her! In the hospital wing fighting for her life!" Deanna held her head in her hands. "Marlie, Marlie, Marlie, why are you so frustratingly naive?"

Rianne was thinking. "Dexter Crabbe, Dexter Crabbe, I know that name, who is he?"

Deanna looked up. "Isn't it obvious?"

Rianne shook her head. "Remind me."

Snape, however, was beginning to understand.

"One of my fifth year students. And a good one, too. He's particularly skilled at Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts. And Professor Quirrell was teaching his fifth years about Sleeping Death only a few weeks ago..." He looked thoughtful.

Deanna was looking grim. "That's not all he's good at, though, is it? He also fancies his chances on the pitch." She had a steely look in her eyes, and Luella was reminded suddenly of Mrs. Tyler.

"He's on our reserve team. He's Seeker." She drew a deep breath. "It's him, it must be. He had the opportunity, the ability and the motive. I've heard him talking, he's wanted to be on the first team for years. He was biding his time in the reserves, waiting for Aidan Lynch to leave. Then, just as he does, along comes this upstart little first year and takes it from him. He must have realised he'd never get on the team, not with her around, and that with only three years left for him at Hogwarts, time was short. So he decided to get rid of her permanently."

Luella was stunned. "Surely he didn't want it that much though? Not enough to have her killed?"

Rianne shrugged. "Who knows? Wouldn't put it past him. Debra reckons he's very ambitious, won't let anything stand in his way. And that's the beauty of Sleeping Death. It doesn't necessarily kill, but it would incapacitate her long enough for him to get on the team and prove himself. Clever."

Deanna was jubilant. "So we've got him! Are you going to expel him, sir? Are you?" She seemed quite excited by the fact.

Snape raised his hands, indicating he wanted calm. "While I am quite willing to believe you, you must understand that poisoning someone with Sleeping Death is quite a serious charge. I cannot simply expel him just like that. I need evidence. Convincing evidence. Otherwise I will have the Crabbes lodging an official complaint, and the Ministry of Magic and the governors of the school will be investigating. I could lose my job." He looked intently at them.

Rianne looked thoughtful. "But if evidence just happened to turn up..."

Snape smiled craftily. "Oh, if there was real, solid proof that Crabbe was responsible, I would of course act on it. However, he is unlikely to confess in my hearing." Again, that intense gaze.

Deanna looked him straight in the eyes. She was smiling too, the exact same expression on her face. "I understand you, sir. And who knows, evidence may turn up sooner than you think."

Snape's eyes gleamed with pride. "I hope so. I would dearly like to know who has poisoned our little Seeker star. If only to placate her mother when she invariably arrives at the school."

Rianne looked suspicious and a little shocked. "Sir, are you asking us to spy for you?"

Snape raised his eyebrows, wide-eyed. "I? Miss Stormosi, I am asking you nothing. Merely stating that I cannot punish whoever was responsible for this state of affairs unless I have evidence. If such turns up, then of course I will act. But it will prove very difficult for a teacher to acquire." He looked meaningfully at them.

Deanna got up. "We understand each other, then." She turned to the others. "Come on. Let's go, we need to talk."

Luella and Rianne looked at each other. Deanna was an obsessive personality at the best of times, but she appeared even more so now. Bidding Snape goodbye, they followed her out. They were greeted at the Nest by a crowd of fellow Slytherins all desperate for news of their Seeker. Deanna ignored them and sat down by the fire, deep in thought. Rianne was fielding the questions one by one. Mike Lovegood was first to make himself heard, and as he pushed through the horde, everyone fell silent. He had a wild, desperate look in his eyes.

"Lu, Rianne, is it true? About Marlie, I mean?" He hesitated, trying to find the words to continue. "They say she collapsed in Potions. Is she alright?" He looked terrified.

Rianne and Luella looked at each other. How to handle this? They were both remembering the events of a few weeks ago, Rianne snarling at Debra in rage, Kat sobbing helplessly. Neither cared for a repeat.

"What exactly have you heard?" Rianne asked gently.

"Just that she collapsed and was taken to the hospital wing. That's all anyone knows for sure. But there's all sorts of rumours flying around, that she's really ill, that she's been poisoned, that she's..." He gulped. "That she's dead."

Luella and Rianne looked at each other sadly. Well, at least they could quash some of the wilder rumours.

"She's not dead." Rianne said. "But she did collapse, and she is quite ill."

"Perhaps it's best you go and see Professor Snape about it. He knows more about it than we do. Probably best you hear it all from him." Luella added.

"He's in his office at the moment, why don't you go now? He can take you up to see her." Rianne coaxed. Mike nodded wordlessly and allowed himself to be shepherded out of the common room.

As soon as he'd gone, the common room erupted into noise. Slytherins were all crowded round, firing questions at them. Mostly concerning what was wrong with her and would she be fit enough to play Ravenclaw next term.

Rianne called for quiet and got it. Luella was quite impressed. Rianne might only be a first year, but she clearly had Debra's authority. She began to speak.

"Quiet! I'm just going to give you the main points that Professor Snape's told us. If you want more details go to him, although you'd be best leaving it till he's finished with Mike. Firstly, Marlie's not dead. But she is quite ill. No, we don't know what caused it, Snape refused to tell us. Probably overwork and stress, then she catches something and it completely knocks her out. Didn't help being in that cold dungeon of Snape's with all those potion fumes wafting around. We think she'll be fine, but she'll be in the hospital wing for a while yet. No, she may not be fit for the next Quidditch match. It all depends on how she does. Even when she's better, she'll need time to recuperate."

Groans and looks of disappointment appeared at this news. Those on the first team looked shocked. They knew that without Marlie, they were finished. Only Dexter Crabbe and his group of friends seemed pleased. Luella noticed them out of the corner of her eye. One look at Crabbe's twisted grin confirmed her worst suspicions. She glanced at Deanna. She was also looking at Crabbe grimly. She looked more fiercely determined than Luella had ever seen her. She glanced at Luella and indicated the passageway to the girls' dorms meaningfully. Luella nodded and gently touched Rianne's elbow. Rianne silently acknowledged her and brought the impromptu press conference to an end.

"Well, that's all I have to say on the matter. If you have any questions, you had better put them to Professor Snape. My friends and I are going to our dorm, we've had enough excitement for one evening. Come on." Ignoring the clamouring voices, Rianne turned and left, followed by Deanna and Luella. They entered their dorm and swiftly locked the door behind them. Snowy immediately leapt off Marlie's bed and ran towards them mewing pitifully. Rianne picked him up and fondled him absently as she sat on her own bed. Luella also lay down, looking at Deanna, who was sitting cross-legged on her bed looking very determined.

"So." Rianne said shortly. "Spit it out, Tyler. What's on your mind?"

Deanna didn't answer immediately. When she did, she sounded preoccupied.

"How are we going to unmask him?" she mused.

"Unmask him? I presume you mean Crabbe?" Rianne sounded quite disapproving.

"Who else?" Deanna said, as if the answer was obvious. "Come on, you saw him back then. He was loving it. Especially when you said she might not be fit for the next match. It's him, I know it."

Rianne still looked doubtful. "Well, I'm sure he might be, but you can't just go and decide it's him when there's only circumstantial evidence to prove it."

"Well, who else was it, then?" Deanna snarled. "He's got the skill and the motive! And he had the opportunity too. Luella, back me up here."

Luella agreed. "Rianne, the case looks proven to me. But we still need evidence though."

Deanna pounced on this. "I never said we didn't. And that's what I'm trying to think of now. How to get it." She fell silent.

"And what have you come up with so far?" Rianne asked.

"Nothing." Deanna admitted. She thought hard for a minute. Then said out loud, "What would Hercule Poirot do?"

"Who?" Rianne asked blankly.

"Fictional Muggle detective. Great at solving mysteries. Deanna's a fan." Luella told her. She thought briefly. "Comb the crime scene for evidence?"

Deanna dismissed this. "Too late. The poison was administered Saturday in the common room. The house elves will have cleaned it all up by now, including the goblet with the potion in it. So sadly there's no poisoned chalice with Crabbe's fingerprints on it to nail him." She sounded deeply frustrated.

Rianne also looked deep in thought. "So with no physical evidence, and no witnesses, I guess we need him to confess somehow."

"But how?" Deanna seemed interested by this plan. "Manipulating him into confessing isn't going to be too hard, but within earshot of a teacher? It can't be on our word alone, that's the whole point. He needs to incriminate himself. Damn, this is hard!" She punched her pillow in frustration.

"It's a shame Muggle technology doesn't work at Hogwarts, all we'd need to do is wire one of us up with a hidden microphone and trick him into confessing. Then get the tapes to Snape and bingo." Luella sighed. Why did things have to be so complicated?

"Nice idea," Rianne was saying, "but you remember what happened to Chris Bryant's Walkman. No tape recorder'll work anywhere near here because of the magic."

Deanna, however, started. "The Walkman! Of course!"

Luella and Rianne looked at each other then at Deanna. She had clearly gone nuts.

"Deanna, what are you talking about?" Rianne asked, bewildered and slightly concerned.

"Yes, what does Chris's Walkman have to do with anything?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"Not the Walkman." Deanna waved her hands. "What Marlie said to Chris afterwards. Don't you remember?"

Luella and Rianne both cast their minds back.

"She said she'd see if her dad could fix it?" Luella suggested.

"And then?" Deanna asked, her eyes gleaming.

Rianne thought. "She said she was going to work on a way of adapting it for use at Hogwarts. Wanted to make a project out of it."

"Bingo." Deanna beamed.

"Sorry for being thick here, but I don't see how that helps us. Marlie's the only one with either knowledge of or interest in the inner workings of Muggle gadgets, and she's in a coma in the hospital wing." Luella pointed out.

Deanna grinned. "She might be, but her notes aren't, are they?" She walked over to Marlie's bed and lifted the covers up. Under the bed was an array of physics textbooks and copious notes, all stuffed into binders.

"She's been working on it for weeks. That's why she was so overworked! Quidditch three times a week, homework and all this too! I first got suspicious when she started complaining about being overworked. I mean, she gets exactly the same amount we do, and she's not anything like as perfectionist as you two are about it. OK, so there's Quidditch, but realistically, that shouldn't have interfered to the extent it had done. So, while she was at training, and you two were watching her, I sneaked back here and poked around." She was grinning like mad now.

Rianne was horrified. "You went through her things? Deanna, that's a terrible thing to have done."

Deanna shrugged. "So sue me. I didn't look at her personal stuff, I just wanted to know what she was up to. And it didn't take me long to find it either, it wasn't well hidden. Just tucked away under here. Anyway, my point is, here we have some very detailed plans on how to adapt tape recorders for a magical environment. Are you with me yet?"

Luella was beginning to understand. "You think we should use the plans and build one! Great idea!"

"Just one tiny flaw." Rianne pointed out. "We are all technical idiots. Marlie knows more about Muggle science and technology at age eleven than most Muggles ever do in an entire lifetime. How on earth are we going to even understand the plans, never

mind follow them? We don't have the know-how, the equipment, the supplies, anything!"

Deanna just smiled even more. "I would have thought the answer to that was obvious."

"Not to me." Rianne said irritably.

Deanna sighed. "Think, you two. What do we Slytherins normally do when confronted by a task outside our ability?"

"Give up?" Rianne suggested.

"No. Think! More particularly, think Slytherin." Deanna sounded impatient.

"Get help?" Luella suggested.

"Close but no banana. Come on." She looked hopeful.

Luella thought. What does a Slytherin do in this situation? Finally, it came to her.

"We manipulate someone else into doing it for us?"

Deanna practically hit the roof with delight. "By George, she's got it!"

"But who do we know who's got the knowhow to do it?" Luella asked.

It was Rianne who answered. "Mr. Lovegood. Of course." She seemed unable to believe how obvious an idea it was when you thought of it. "He'd love a challenge like this, and he knows about our world. Plus he can get Mrs. Lovegood to acquire the magical things needed, and maybe do any magic necessary."

Deanna looked ecstatic with joy. "It's an amazing idea, isn't it? Damn, I'm good." She was looking very smug.

Luella, however, had doubts. "But won't he think it's a bit unethical, making a tape recorder to ensnare someone? Even if they did poison his daughter."

"Well, we won't tell him that, will we?" Deanna said patiently. "We tell him Marlie was working on it before, and we think it would be a tribute to her talent, and a nice surprise for her when she wakes up, if he could finish it for us."

"What if he thinks we're just interested in acquiring a sound system for the common room?" Rianne pointed out.

"He won't. Will he?" Deanna looked worried. This was the first major flaw in her plan. Luella was thinking. Something had occurred to her, a memory of a TV programme she'd seen recently.

"Wait. I think I have an idea." Deanna and Rianne looked at her curiously. Luella continued, still concentrating hard. "I saw this programme once, and there was this girl whose mother was in a car accident and ended up in a coma. Anyway, the girl compiled a tape of her mother's favourite songs and things, and played it to her to try and bring her round." She looked hopefully at the others. "We could say we want to do that for Marlie? You know, put together a tape of tunes she likes, talk to her, that sort of thing. Plus, if we say we're compiling our own tapes for her, that gives us an excuse to ask for a machine that actually has a microphone and records stuff. A Walkman won't cut it."

Deanna and Rianne were open-mouthed. "Luella, that's brilliant." Rianne said, in awe.

"That is the most devious, manipulative thing I've ever heard you say." Deanna said fervently. "It's wonderful! Let's do it!"

"I think I'd better actually write to him." Rianne said. "After all, he knows me. We'd also better give it a few days first, give Snape time to tell them about Marlie. I don't want them hearing it any other way." She seemed distant, a haunted look in her eyes. "Not for all the world would I do that to them." she said quietly.

Deanna and Luella squirmed slightly. They still felt a fair bit of residual guilt over their part in the Stormosi Incident. Deanna dealt with hers by ignoring it.

"OK. But when will we know when he's told them?" she asked.

Luella replied, "Probably when Mrs. Lovegood arrives at Hogwarts calling for Dumbledore's blood, and vengeance on whoever poisoned her daughter. And she will." She shuddered at the thought. "Poor Professor Snape, having to deal with that. She'll blame him, especially when she finds out she may have been poisoned when he was in the room."

"Never mind him, let's focus on Marlie. OK, so Mr. Lovegood builds the tape recorder, we do the necessary Charms - sorry, *I* do the necessary Charms. No offence, but I am better at it than you two." Deanna couldn't resist a smirk. There weren't many subjects where Deanna was better than Luella and Rianne and she wanted to make the most of the ones where she was.

Rianne nodded. "OK, we've got a working tape recorder. Then what?"

Deanna said quietly, "We need someone to worm a confession out of Crabbe while wearing it. Someone possessed of considerable charm and manipulateness. More importantly, it needs to be someone he'll trust, who he'll believe has no positive feelings for Marlie. Only one option there, folks. I'll have to do it."

"You?" Rianne asked, surprised.

"Yes, me. Look, I'm the only one who didn't get on with her that well. It'll have to be, won't it?"

"Dee, that could take months. All year, in fact." Luella said quietly. "Are you sure?"

Deanna nodded. "I know. But I'll do it. I mean, the bastard poisoned her! No one does that to a mate of mine and get away with it."

"But Deanna," Rianne said, "you know what the consequences will be? Especially with Marlie so ill."

Deanna nodded again. "Social ostracism, and the contempt of my entire house. I know. But I'll risk it. Don't look so worried, you two! I've had an entire lifetime of everyone hating me. I'm sure I can manage it for a few more months."

Luella got up and hugged her. "You'll have our full support. We won't abandon you, will we, Ri?"

Rianne joined her. "We're behind you every step of the way, Tyler."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'm going to need all the support I can get." Deanna shivered. "You know, I'm really not looking forward to this."

Luella gave her a hug of support. "Hey, we're here for you. Aren't we, Ri?"

"Of course we are. This whole thing is your baby. Without you, we'd be sat here helplessly looking on while that scumbag gets away with attempted murder. Now, we have a fighting chance."

"But it could still go horribly wrong." Luella reminded them both. "Suppose Mr. Lovegood can't develop the tape recorder?"

Rianne said softly, "Then we think of something else."

"It'll work." Deanna said quietly. "It has to." She shot another glance at Marlie's empty bed. "For Marlie's sake."

"For Marlie's sake." they said together, holding hands. They looked into each other's eyes. Their plan was born.

Chapter Eleven: The Dreaming

It did not take long for the news to reach Marlie's parents. On Wednesday morning, the end of Potions was interrupted by Mrs. Lovegood striding into the classroom. She said nothing, just looked at Snape and said "Well, Severus?" Snape went very pale all of a sudden and sent them away ten minutes earlier than normal. As they left, Deanna turned to Rianne and murmured "I think it's safe to send that owl now."

Herbology, their next lesson, passed all too slowly, and as soon as Professor Sprout let them go, they raced to the hospital wing to see Marlie. They slipped through the door and went to the far end, where Marlie still lay, surrounded by screens. As they approached, they heard voices. Deanna motioned for silence, and they crept up stealthily.

Behind the screens, Mrs. Lovegood was talking to Professor Snape. She looked furious.

"What I would still like to know, Severus, is how a student managed to lay hands on a banned substance like Sleeping Death!"

Snape seemed very nervous and unsure of himself. Luella did not entirely blame him; Mrs. Lovegood could unnerve someone even as self-possessed as Snape.

"Well, Melissa, Sleeping Death, not really my subject area, Professor Quirrell is the one responsible for teaching about that. The recipe is in the library, one gifted enough at Potions could do it, I've a few students who'd be up to it." He was umming and aahing a lot. Mrs. Lovegood cut him dead.

"A student brew it? The Department of Dark Arts Eradication's best mages could not unlock it's secrets. Don't you think it more likely she received it straight from the manufacturer?" Her eyes glimmered strangely and there was a cold, hard look on her face.

Snape seemed to freeze motionless. When he spoke, it was in a firm, soft voice they'd not heard him use before.

"Marlene Lovegood received this poison from a student, and no one else. Your best mages could never have worked out the recipe merely by observing the symptoms. However, anyone more than averagely skilled in Potions can make it up if they have the recipe in front of them. It is in the Restricted Section, but a resourceful student can find their way around that if they need to." Snape was calm but his every word was laced with carefully concealed anger.

"Be that as it may," Mrs. Lovegood said coldly, "this is Dark Arts activity of the highest order. She is in your house and your responsibility. If she dies," she looked at her daughter and they saw a flicker of anguish in her eyes, "I am holding you responsible." She regarded Snape contemptuously.

Snape's temper was beginning to fray. "My dear Melissa, I quite understand your feelings. However, I am at a loss to see what I can do. There is no antidote for Sleeping Death."

Mrs. Lovegood's next words were spat venomously at the Potions Master. "Then you had better find one, hadn't you? Come, Severus. They call you the Potions Master, don't they? And at school you were always far and away the best at that subject. Not even James Potter could outsmart you there. And no one understands the workings of Sleeping Death better than you." A sarcastic smile. "Prove your mastery. Find an antidote for Sleeping Death. Cure my daughter. If she lives, I am in your debt. If she dies..." She leant forward. "I know you, Severus Snape. I know your past. I know your mind. I know your secrets. And I say this to you, Dumbledore or no Dumbledore, you will find that some of those secrets might start coming to light." Her eyes bored into Snape's. She was evidently serious.

Snape met her gaze, but he still appeared worried. He seemed to take her seriously as well.

"Very well. I will do my best to find an antidote." He looked at Marlene and sighed heavily. "I do not wish to see Miss Lovegood suffer any more than you do. I will do what I can for her. She is in good hands."

Mrs. Lovegood seemed satisfied with this. Luella, realising she was about to leave, pulled the other two back. They retreated just out of earshot. As soon as Mrs. Lovegood stepped out, they began walking nervously forward. Mrs. Lovegood started, then recovered and greeted them warmly enough.

"Hello, you three. Have you come to see Marlie?"

Rianne nodded. "How is she, Mrs. Lovegood?"

Mrs. Lovegood shook her head. "No better, but Professor Snape has promised me he will do all in his power to bring her round. She is in good hands." She looked weary. Snape joined them.

"Here to visit Miss Lovegood?" he asked shortly. They nodded. "Go through then. Do not wait on my account." However, as Deanna passed, he stopped her and whispered in her ear. Luella caught what he was saying.

"Miss Tyler, have you thought any more about our conversation on Monday?"

Deanna nodded quietly. "We've got that under control, sir."

Snape's lips twisted into what could be described as a smile. "Very good. Truly, you have a Slytherin mind. Your mother will be proud." With that, he turned back to Mrs. Lovegood. "They will be serving lunch in the Great Hall, Melissa, would you care for a meal before leaving?"

"Thank you, Severus, but I must return to London. I have urgent business awaiting my attention." Mrs. Lovegood said politely as they left the room. The three girls waited until they had gone before gathering around their friend.

"Hey, Marlie." Rianne said, trying not to sound despairing. Marlie did not move. She just lay there, her eyes closed, looking paler and weaker than they had yet seen her. Luella was shocked to see how small and fragile Marlene actually looked.

Deanna stroked Marlie's arm tenderly. "Marlie, we're going to get you some cool tapes. Some of your favourite tunes, a few words from all of us, that sort of thing. Cheer you up, like." She was smiling helplessly.

"Yeah, we're going to give you lots of updates on life at Hogwarts. So you know what you're missing. Give you a reason to come back." Luella said brightly.

"And you know what else we're doing for you?" Rianne asked conspiratorially. "Well, Deanna found your plans on how to adapt a Walkman. So we're sending them off to your dad to see if he can actually build the thing. That way we can play the tapes for you here. And when you're well again, we're going to have the party to end all parties with it." Rianne's enthusiasm sounded slightly forced, but well-meant for all that.

Deanna lowered her voice. "That's not all we're going to do with it though. We're going to get the git who did this to you, Marls. We're going to trick him into confessing everything. And we're going to tape him doing it. And we're going to get him expelled." A fierce joy came into her eyes. "Whatever happens to you, we will get revenge for this!" She gazed fixedly at Marlene. Marlie just stirred in her sleep.

They didn't stay much longer. Marlie stirred slightly and moaned, but did very little else. After a while, they ran out of things to say to her. Luella found it very disconcerting seeing Marlie toss and turn feverishly, but not wake. They didn't talk about it over lunchtime, and the subject wasn't discussed until that afternoon's Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson.

The lesson was proceeding as usual. Professor Quirrell had them taking notes on superstitions and the best ways of avoiding bad luck. However, the class seemed distracted and it wasn't long before Lucas Vetinari had raised his hand to ask the question on everybody's mind.

Quirrell noticed him. "Y- Yes, Vetin- n- n- nari?" There was a quiver in his voice, almost as if he didn't want to know what Lucas wanted to ask. He was proved right immediately.

"Sir, what's the Sleeping Death Potion?" Lucas asked.

Quirrell smiled timidly. "Vetinari, that's f-f-fourth year kn-kn-knowledge. I h-hardly think you n-need to kn-know that just y-yet."

"Why not?" Lucas said forthrightly. "One of our year's in the hospital wing because of it, we need to know what it is. In case someone goes for us next." Lucas glared at Quirrell, as if daring him to refuse to tell him.

The rest of the class had taken an immediate interest. Quirrell's eyes darted terrified from face to face. On the one hand, he didn't want to incur Professor Snape's wrath by giving out too much information on the subject. On the other, he'd never had a class paying him so much attention before.

Alex Lynch came to his friend's aid. "Go on sir, tell us. We'd really like to know about it. Wouldn't we?" A general murmur of assent went around the class.

Quirrell seemed to realise that arguing was a lost cause. "Oh v-very well. But I'm l-leaving out the more dist-t-turbing bits." Muttering met this, but no one felt brave enough to complain.

"Sleeping Death is a potion invented by one of Y-You-Know-Who's followers back in the R-reign of Terror. It is believed to be a m-mixture of a very strong sleeping p-potion, assorted ps-psychoactive plants, halluc-cinogens, and poison. It's very dangerous and, n-needless to say, illegal. Use of it on a f-fellow student will bring e-e-expulsion." He gave them a warning glance. At least, the nearest Professor Quirrell ever got to it.

"It w-works by appealing to the soul's d-desire to escape the st-resses and st-rains of life and return to psychic oneness with all c-creation. The body grows w-wearier and w-wearier until the victim falls asleep. First s-symptoms will show in 24 hours of a-administration, sleep inv-v-variably follows after 48. Initial symptoms include f-fever, tiredness, l-loss of appetite, w-weakness, and ironically, i-insomnia. It can be m-mistaken for fl-fl-flu at first. However, the coma soon d-d-disproves that." Quirrell's stammer was getting worse than ever, as if he found even talking about Sleeping Death terrifying. Luella found herself wondering how Quirrell ever got a job teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts if he was that frightened of it.

"The c-coma that gives the p-potion it's n-name is the k-key to both succ-c-cumbing to it and d-d-defeating it. The sleep is a w-wild, d-disturbed one, during which the v-victim has many vi-vi-vivid and t-terrifying dreams. How they r-react to these d-dreams is said to be the k-key to whether they wake or not. For the d-dreams are said to c-consist of the person's d-deepest fears. They must confront their inner d-demons in sleep, and c-conquer them in order to w-wake, so it is said by many s-survivors. However, the potion gives str-strength to that p-part of the p-person that desires d-death, an end to striving, a return to the w-womb. This s-saps their strength and makes it more l-likely that they will give in. And if they d-do that, they will fail and d-d-die."

The class was hanging on his every word, shocked. Luella was stunned. This was what awaited Marlie? Going on her experience of the youngest Lovegood, Marlie had a tough fight ahead of her.

Timidly, she spoke up. "Isn't there anything that can be done?"

Quirrell's voice had little hope in it. "V-Very little. The fight belongs to the vi-victim. It is their d-demons that they must fight, and that b-b-battle is theirs alone. There are p-powerful antidotes around, and these bring some r-r-relief. They inhibit the effects of the p-poison to a certain extent and depr-pr-ive the person's d-dark side of a source of it's str-strength, enabling the p-person's desire for l-life to gain a respite and

f-fight back better. It is also said that p-p-playing cheerful m-music, talking to the p-person, reminding them of all the r-reasons why it is g-good for them to live, has a morale-boosting effect. But n-none of these are g-guaranteed. In the end, it all hinges on the v-victim's inner strength."

Luella shot Rianne a look. Rianne looked as concerned as she did. If Marlie's survival hinged on her inner strength and staying power, Marlie was doomed. But on the other hand, as Deanna said later, it did mean that their request for a working tape recorder was all the more legitimate.

Marlie looked about her, shivering. She'd never felt so cold in all her life. Where was she? It was so dark. Mist swirled about her, and an icy wind swept through her, chilling her to the bone. There was no one else around. Fear began to grip her. How to get out of here? How to get back to Hogwarts? A vision of dying here, cold and all alone haunted her. She began to weep softly.

"Help me. Someone. Anyone. Please." she whispered, tears rolling down her face.

"Don't leave me here, I don't want to die. Not like this." She wrapped her cloak around her and walked on. The wind died down, but there was still no light. She walked on still, until what strength she possessed gave out. Hopelessly, she sank to her knees and began to cry. Curling on her side in a foetal position, she began to prepare for the worst.

Then came the noise. A soft padding of feet coming towards her. She looked up. Approaching through the mist was a small shape. It was on all fours, so some kind of animal. Marlie attempted to make it out, but it was too dark. Not until it came right up to her did she recognise it.

"Snowy!" she gasped with delight. Reaching out, she scooped up the cat and hugged him tightly. "Snowy, thank the gods! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" She stroked the cat's soft white fur happily. At least she was no longer alone. Somehow, Snowy had managed to find her. And if Snowy could find the way from Hogwarts to wherever this was, then there must be a way back too. Feeling hopeful again, Marlie got to her feet.

Snowy was mewing loudly. He seemed very insistent about something. "What is it, Snowy-puss? What've you got there?" She looked at the cat more closely. Clamped in between Snowy's jaws was a long, thin object, looking remarkably like...

"My wand!" she cried. Snatching it up, she waved it. A dazzling jet of sparks shot out of it. Clearly her magical powers were working just fine. "Lumos!" she whispered. The tip of her wand lit up. It wasn't much, but it was enough light to see by. Snowy rubbed up against her and purred. Marlie wrapped him around her shoulders like a scarf. Much better. The cold got to her far less with a soft, warm, purring cat draped round her. OK, so she was still all alone, it was cold and dark, she had no idea where she was, and no idea how to get home. But with a working wand and her favourite cat with her, things were looking up. In the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey surveyed Marlie critically. There had been little change in her condition since she'd been brought in a few days ago. In fact, she'd actually deteriorated a little. It was really quite unnerving, watching her toss and turn, whimpering and crying. Although in the last few hours, it had seemed to get worse. Marlene had been literally begging for help, sounding quite desperate and forlorn. Madam Pomfrey had sat by her side,

stroked her hair and spoken to her soothingly but Marlene hadn't appeared to notice. She'd then seemed to weaken and stop fighting, just lying still, but her temperature had dropped, her breathing became shallower, her pulse slowed and she'd seemed to go downhill fast. Madam Pomfrey had reacted swiftly. Professor Snape had left virtually his entire supply of poison antidote up here for her use, with instructions that Miss Lovegood was to receive three drops three times a day and extra doses if her condition warranted it. Well, this looked like one of those extra times. A few minutes later, and Marlene had visibly relaxed. She was no longer crying, and seemed to be sleeping quite peacefully. Madam Pomfrey even heard her crooning the name of her pet cat softly to herself. Smiling with relief, she left Marlene to attend to her other patients. That evening, up in the Owlery, Rianne and Luella were attaching a large parcel to Barney and Spooky. Neither owl looked happy about carrying it all the way to the Lovegoods' home in Devon, but both knew better than to argue with Rianne. The two girls watched them go pensively.

"Do you think he'll agree?" Luella asked.

Rianne replied confidently. "Of course he will, he and Marlie are really close, and he loves a challenge. Thing is, will he be able to make a tape recorder that works here?"

Luella sighed. "Well, if not, we'll have to think of a Plan B. Don't know how though."

Rianne tried to sound confident. "Deanna'll think of something. Won't she?"

"Course she will. None better at coming up with hare-brained schemes."

And with that, the two Slytherins made their way back to the Nest. The Slytherin Common Room was unusually quiet these days. While it was frequently quieter than the other houses' common rooms, these days it felt like a morgue. Mike Lovegood, once so extrovert and lively, had turned into a shadow of his old self. He spent most of his time when not training or studying simply sitting in a corner staring emptily into space. Few dared to approach him when he was like this. Only Kat would sit next to him in solidarity.

Among the first year, the atmosphere was equally deathly, if not more so. Chris Bryant in particular seemed to have been hit hard by it all, not saying much to anybody. Lucas Vetinari was attempting to keep morale up, but it was clear that Marlie's illness had affected everybody. Professor Snape had told them all that Marlie had accidentally imbibed a deadly potion, but no one seriously believed that. Rumours had spread like wildfire, until finally Rianne had decided that enough was enough, and it was better that they all know the truth, especially as it was actually less shocking than some of the rumours.

Deanna was keeping apart from the rest of the first year. The three girls had decided that it was probably best if she gave the impression of alienating herself a little, to give her the necessary distance from Marlie's fan club. And so Deanna stopped participating in Slytherin social life, kept herself to herself and sat in a corner doing her homework.

Not far away, the Slytherin boys were quietly discussing Marlie.

"Do you reckon she'll be alright?" Chris was asking worriedly.

Lucas shrugged. "Difficult to say. Sleeping Death's not 100% fatal, it can be recovered from. But it's difficult to do that. Just hope Marlie's inner demons aren't too terrifying."

Deanna plucked up her courage. Now or never. "Pretty forlorn hope, then. Marlie's scared of her own shadow half the time. She's got the inner strength of a blanchmange."

The five boys turned to look at her. They looked rather annoyed.

"What would you know, Tyler?" Lucas snapped. "You hate the girl. Everyone knows that you and her weren't speaking until she won that Quidditch match."

Deanna shrugged. "So? I can recognise inner strength when I see it and Lovegood's got none. She's doomed."

"Well, we didn't ask you." Chris said angrily. "So butt out. We like Marlie, even if you don't."

"Suit yourself." Deanna said irritably and returned to her Defence Against the Dark Arts assignment. She smiled secretly to herself. This was easier than she'd hoped. She shot a glance at Dexter Crabbe and his friends. They'd heard everything, and Crabbe was now regarding her with interest. Deanna looked quickly away. Things were going very well indeed. Mr. Lovegood wrote back a few days later. Luella and Deanna peered over Rianne's shoulder as she read.

"He says he thinks it's a wonderful idea." Rianne told them delightedly. "Very proud of us for coming up with it, and very impressed at Marlie's designs, he says they're really good. Reckons it shouldn't take him long to build the thing, not once he's got all the parts together. He's just put an order in for them. He also says Mrs. Lovegood's fascinated too, says she's agreed to help out with the magic."

"Yes, yes," Deanna interrupted, impatiently, "but when does he reckon it'll be finished? Hopefully soon, I don't want to have to spend too long ingratiating myself with Crabbe's little gang."

Rianne scanned the letter. "He says it could be ready by Christmas."

Deanna nodded. "Not so long." She gazed into the distance. "The sacrifice will be worth it. At some point, you two, we'll have to stage a row. Over Marlie. In public. With the entire house listening in. I say we do that at the beginning of December. That'll give us time to start laying the foundations so it doesn't sound too fake. It'll also give me time to start gaining Crabbe's trust yet not have to spend more than a few weeks as Public Enemy Number One."

Rianne and Luella nodded. "Agreed." Rianne said.

Luella gave Deanna a hug. "Good luck, our kid. I know what this means to you, having to make yourself unpopular like this."

Deanna brushed her off affectionately. "Lu, don't worry. I'm hard. Anyway, I'm used to being picked on and being the odd one out. I'll cope. Come on, I'm hungry. Breakfast awaits." In his office, Professor Snape was going through his many Potions books, seeking inspiration on making an antidote. Corvus watched him curiously from his perch.

Snape angrily slammed another book shut.

"Nothing! Damn it, Corvus, there must be a way of reviving someone from Sleeping Death, there must be. Someone, surely, has done some work on this before." Snape gazed into the fire thoughtfully. Corvus fluttered over to him and cawed softly. Snape absently fed him.

"Think, Severus, think." he murmured quietly. "How does Sleeping Death work?" The answer to that particular question was not a difficult one. Since the Fall of Voldemort, Sleeping Death's secrets had come skulking into the light. His own thesis had been on Sleeping Death and it's workings. Flipping through it idly, he came to a section entitled "The Future: A Possible Antidote for Sleeping Death?"

Snape read, concentrating hard.

"Sleeping Death works by giving strength to that part of a person which desires death. Therefore, an effective antidote must not just inhibit a person's death drive, but give power to that part of the psyche which desires life. Conventional antidotes inhibit the poison, and give the psyche an opportunity to fight, but give it no added strength. I speculate that in order to be effective, the antidote must have energising, life-enhancing qualities, and be capable of dispelling the dark shadows of the soul."

He laid down the thesis, now intrigued. He actually remembered writing that. If he recalled correctly, it had been at three o'clock in the morning the night before the thesis was due in, and he'd been high on ginseng and caffeine. All rational thought had receded into oblivion and he'd been channelling whatever his mind had given him. Still, it had seemed to go down well with the Professors at the Invisible College, who'd given him top marks. And maybe, just maybe, somewhere in these youthful ramblings, was hidden a possible solution. Well, it was worth a try.

Snape began to search his stores for possible ingredients. Ginseng, guarana leaves, St. John's Wort, these were a given. Also coffee beans, cocoa beans, a fair bit of sugar and some strange golden concoction the Muggles referred to as Lucozade. Starting to feel much more enthusiastic about this project, Snape set to work.

Wandering through the mist, her wand lighting the way and Snowy draped round her shoulders, Marlie peered into the gloom. Ahead of her, the mist seemed to part, revealing a stone wall with a door in it. At last! A possible way out. Quickening her pace, she went over to it and pushed it open.

Stepping through, she gasped. Bright sunshine met her eyes as she stepped into a well-lit, comfortable room. Such a contrast to what she'd left behind. But that wasn't all. As the door closed about her and she looked around, she was amazed to see that it was her nursery from childhood. All around were scattered books and toys, some Muggle, some clearly not. All brought back happy memories. In fact, walking through

it all, Marlie felt the years fall away from her. Snowy leapt off her in fright as she metamorphosed into a little girl again.

She heard a voice calling her name. "Miss Marlie, Miss Marlie! Where is you, Miss Marlie!"

"Sukey! Sukey!" Marlie giggled, running in the direction of the speaker. There, clad in a tea-towel and an apron, was the Lovegoods' house-elf Sukey. She was sitting in a chair with a storybook on her knee. A young boy Marlie instantly recognised as her brother Mike was sat at her feet. Marlie ran over to join them.

"Here I am, Sukey!" she called happily. Sukey and Mike turned to look at her. Marlie stopped dead to see the looks on their faces. Both were looking at her with evident fear and confusion. Snowy mewed a warning. Marlie felt her bottom lip tremble.

"Sukey? Mikey?" she whispered. From her left came the sound of another little girl's footsteps running. Marlie turned and felt her jaw drop with shock.

There was another little girl there, also in the same blue dress Marlie was wearing, and with the same blonde hair flowing behind her. She was even carrying the same pink rabbit with her that Marlie had in her hands. Her features were the same, if paler. However, her eyes were completely different. Black, cold and dark, with red flames raging in the centre. And the expression she wore on her face was one of savage, joyful triumph.

"Here I am, Sukey!" she called, in a voice that was Marlie's, but transformed into something demonic. It sounded utterly incongruous coming from that little girl body. There was a harsh, mocking tone to it.

"Sukey, she's evil, watch out!" Marlie screamed. Sukey ignored her utterly, and then did the worst thing of all. She turned to the other girl and said to her "There you is, Miss Marlie! Where has you been, I has been looking for you all over! Come here, I is going to read you both a story." And with that, all three settled down as Sukey began to read. Marlie dropped her toy rabbit, put her hands to her ears and screamed. The demon girl turned towards her, cruel laughter in her eyes, and poked her tongue out at her, before turning back to hear the story.

Sobbing, Marlie sank to her knees, returning to her eleven year old self in an instant. What was happening? How could her own brother and the family house-elf who'd practically brought her up not recognise her? And how could they possibly accept that... that thing instead of her? She felt Snowy brush up against her, mewing pitifully. She picked the cat up and held him, feeling his soft fur brushing against her cheek.

"This must be Dark Arts stuff." Marlie murmured to the cat. "Someone's put some kind of charm on them so they don't recognise me, and then that impostor's turned up." She got to her feet, a feeling of resolution strengthening her. "And if it's Dark Arts stuff, then I have to find Mum. She'll be able to sort it all out." And with that, she set off. She did not have to look far. As she left the nursery and began searching the house, she was met downstairs by her mother striding towards her. Marlie ran towards her, arms outstretched, but was halted by the look of anger on her mother's face.

"Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood, what have you been up to now?" she thundered.

"Mum, you have to listen, there's Dark Arts going on, you have to stop it!" Marlie pleaded, but to no avail. Mrs. Lovegood, deaf to her pleas, grabbed her by the arm and hauled her into the living room. There, to her horror, she saw the demon again, laughing dementedly in a way oddly reminiscent of Peeves the Hogwarts poltergeist. And much like Peeves, she was busily engaged in smashing the entire living room to bits.

"No!" Marlie gasped. "Stop it, you mustn't do that!" The demon grinned at her and laughed all the more.

"Look at what you've done!" Mrs. Lovegood was shouting. "All these precious things, some of them were antique! You bad, disobedient girl!" She slapped Marlie hard.

Marlie sank to the floor weeping. "Mum, it wasn't me, I swear it wasn't me! There's Dark Arts going on, you have to believe me! Can't you see her, the devil child?"

Mrs. Lovegood turned on her furiously. "So you're not just a vandal, you're a liar too! Who was it then, your imaginary friend? Dark Arts, my foot. You are the cause of this, Marlene, and you must take responsibility. Come here!" Marlene cried as her mother dragged her off towards the cellar, ignoring her protestations. She found herself flung to the floor, with her mother standing over her, looking very stern indeed.

Mrs. Lovegood spoke in a chilling voice. "You must learn to take proper responsibility for yourself and your actions, Marlene. Stop pretending you're some kind of innocent angel. You may have your father wrapped around your little finger, but you do not fool me." She leant closer and looked Marlie straight in the eye. "You've more than your fair share of devil inside, Marlene. And until you've learnt to accept that and take responsibility for your actions, here you stay. Do you understand me?" She gave Marlie a long, hard look. For a moment, Marlie thought she saw more than severity in them, a look of pleading desperation too. Then Mrs. Lovegood let her go and walked away. The cellar door slammed behind her and from the other side, she heard it being locked.

Marlie was in shock. Trapped in here, by her own mother. For something she hadn't even done. Well, she had to devise a way of getting out of here. Feeling in her robes, she reached for her wand and approached the door. "*Alohomora!*" she cried. The charm hit the door just fine, but it didn't open. Crestfallen, she sat down in a corner. She wished Deanna was here. She was much better at Charms, she'd be able to get them out of here. Or at least think up a scheme to help them. Or maybe Luella. She was good at most of her subjects (except Flying), she might be able to do some magic to help them. Or maybe she'd have noticed something Marlie had overlooked. Lu was good at that, picking up what others missed. Or Rianne, perhaps. Adults always believed her, she'd be able to talk her mother round. Even the Weasley twins might be of some use; at least she wouldn't get bored.

It was then that a voice called to her through the small grille near the ceiling. Marlie turned. Peering through it were none other than the Weasleys themselves.

"Fred! George!" Marlie cried in delight. "Am I glad to see you! Mum's locked me in here, can you get me out?"

The twins just smirked. "Glad to see us?" Fred grinned. "That'll be a first, eh George?"

George was also grinning evilly. "Too right. Thought you hated us, Lovegood?"

Marlie began to panic. "Look, boys, I'm sorry I said all those horrible things to you over the years. I'm sorry I kept getting you in trouble with Mum, and your parents. And I'm really sorry I got you in trouble with Snape that time. I'll never do it again. But please help me out of here!"

Fred and George just grinned nastily. "Sorry, Marls." Fred said. "But you've got us in trouble for things we haven't done so often that we're rather enjoying the sight of you getting punished for once. Anyway, we've got someone new to play with now."

Another figure came up behind them. Marlie was unsurprised to see the devil Marlie again.

"Meet Morticia. She's just moved in at your place." George indicated the devil Marlie, who just grinned.

"Tell you what, she's a lot more fun than you, kid." Fred laughed, slipping his arm round her. "Aren't you, Tish?" Morticia just simpered. Fred grinned like an idiot, and they nuzzled each other's noses. Marlie felt her rage erupting.

"More fun?" she snapped. "She's an evil little tart, and if you can't see that, Fred Weasley, then you're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"Ooooooh!" both twins sneered.

"You want to watch out there, Fred, I think Lovegood's getting jealous." George commented wryly. Marlie blushed. He was right, but she'd rather die than admit it. Fred leered at her.

"I'd be a little more polite if I were you, you're really in no position to dictate to us, are you?"

"We'll be seeing you, Marlie. Maybe we'll be back when you're in a better mood." George said, and the three of them went off. Marlie watched them go, furious. First that devil kid turned her own family against her, now she was stealing her friends away. She didn't even like the Weasley twins that much, but hearing them prefer that tart to her was heartbreaking. Especially seeing Fred and her cozying up together...

She shuddered, and sank to her knees, the tears beginning to come again. Deanna came to mind once more. Far from mistrusting and hating her, she actually began to think positively of her. Compared to that Morticia, she was sweet and charming. At least Deanna would never pretend to be anything other than she was, no matter what. She couldn't see Deanna ever pretending to be all sweet and angelic to wrap parents

and teachers around her little finger. What's wrong with them all? she thought. Why can't they see through her, see her for what she is? She's evil and manipulative, pretending to be all innocent and nice so that people will like her and do whatever she wants, Marlie thought angrily. So why can't anyone other than me see that? Why are they all acting like I'm the evil one? She thought back to her mother, telling her she would stay here until she could take responsibility for her actions. But they're not my actions! she thought desperately. It's that devil Morticia. It's all her fault, not mine. She's the one causing all this! she thought furiously. Angrily, she waved her wand, causing a bucket to go flying across the room.

"Touchy, aren't we?" an all-too familiar voice came across the room. Deanna was standing there watching her, wand in hand, arms folded, leaning against the wall, dressed in her Hogwarts robes.

"Deanna!" Marlie cried with relief. "Tyler, you've got to help me, I'm trapped in here. You're good at Charms, get that door open! Please?" she whispered.

Deanna was dismissive. "Turning on the charm will get you nowhere. Anyway, this is your fight. I'm not allowed to intervene. I just thought I'd come and see how you were getting on. Not very well, it would seem." She looked around contemptuously.

Marlie felt herself getting angry. "Look, Deanna, if all you're going to do is make snide comments, then go away. I need help here!"

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "You mean you've not worked it out yet? Shame on you, Marlene!" She was grinning evilly. "It's not like you've not had plenty of clues, after all."

"Worked what out?" Marlene snapped.

Deanna sighed. "Where you are. What your task is. Who Morticia is!"

Marlie shook her head. "Who is she? I've never seen her before in my life!"

Deanna smiled enigmatically. "No? You sure about that, Marlie? Never had a childhood friend of that name?"

Marlie shook her head again. "Never. Unless..." Something occurred to her. There had been a Morticia in her childhood, hadn't there? And it wasn't the first time Morticia had got her punished either...

"She was my imaginary friend as a kid." she said softly. "I was always talking to her, playing with her, asking for a place to be laid for her at table."

"And?" Deanna pushed.

"And..." Marlie was thinking hard. She looked up. An idea had come to her. "This happened before! I broke some of my mum's stuff once. It was an accident, but I was scared of Mum punishing me, so I tried to blame it on Morticia. Mum locked me in

my room until dinner. She only relented when I confessed I'd done it. Wanted to stop me lying."

"Did it work?" Deanna asked. Marlie shook her head with a smile.

"No. Just taught me to blame it on someone Mum would actually believe it was next time."

Deanna's grin became even bigger. "And the moral of that story is...?"

Marlie shook her head. "I don't know! Tell me."

Deanna sighed. Disappointment etched itself all over her.

"Marlie, I can't tell you the answer, you have to work it out for yourself. But there are clues. Think! Your brother and Sukey think Morticia's the real Marlie Lovegood and you're an impostor. Your mother sees it's really you, but blames you for what Morticia's done, saying that you are responsible and must pay the price. And you're trapped in here until you are able to take full responsibility for what you've done. The Weasleys are glad to see you get in trouble for once, they're glad to see that someone's finally recognised that you've a devil in you. And then they prefer to be with Morticia. Why?"

Marlie couldn't think. At length she volunteered "Because she's duped them into thinking she's wonderful?"

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. "No! They like her precisely because she's not wonderful! She's someone as mischievous as they are, that's why they think she's great. Not stuck up little Marlie who's an innocent little angel who never gets in trouble! They're not fooled by her one bit! Think. Who's really deceiving who?"

Marlie snapped, "She is! She's tricking them all!"

Deanna sighed. She was evidently giving up. "Alright. Alright. What about me, then? When we first met, I hated you on sight. Why?"

Marlie shrugged. "I don't know. I never did anything to annoy you. You tell me!"

"OK." Deanna nodded. "You deserve that. I thought you were some powerless little thing who needed help to do anything. Then as I got to know you a little better, I saw that wasn't entirely true. You did have power, how could a Slytherin be otherwise? But you pretended to have none so people would spoil you and protect you. Your father, Mike, your mum, the house elf, even Snape was taken in. A sweet little innocent who never got in trouble and who would never do anything out of line. And I despised you for it."

"Despised me? Just because I behave myself and Snape likes me." Marlie sniffed.

"Behave yourself? Given a chance you'd be out-Weasleying the Weasley twins." laughed Deanna. "Which is precisely my point. You're not anything like as innocent

as you pretend to be. You're faking it, and the sad thing is, you don't even know you're faking it any more. And it was only when you started to show your real feelings that I started to respect you."

"Quidditch." Marlie breathed. "When I started to do well at Quidditch, you changed your mind. You helped me train, and you were proud of me after I won the match. You did the banner too."

Deanna smiled gently. Marlie was surprised to see how pretty Deanna looked when she was genuinely happy.

"Of course I did. You were terrified you weren't up to it. It was the first really genuine feeling you'd shown since I'd known you. I felt kind of sorry for you, to tell you the truth. Plus I wanted Slytherin to do well. So I thought I'd help you out. And lo and behold, you won, and you were properly grateful, and I realised you weren't so bad, when you let yourself go a bit. You and I could be good friends, you know. If you sort yourself out." The sneer had returned.

"So if you want to be my friend so much, why don't you stop talking in riddles and help me out?" Marlie snapped.

"I'm trying!" Deanna said tetchily. "Alright. One last hint. Our little fight wasn't all one-sided, was it? What did you hate about me?"

Marlie thought. "You never had anything nice to say about anyone. You didn't seem to care about anyone. No social graces whatsoever. And you were horrible to me! If I was bothering you, you could have said it nicely so I could stop. But no. You had to just bitch at me."

"And yet you called on me." Deanna mused. "When you were trapped here, in dire trouble, you thought of me. Why?"

Marlie shrugged. "Because you're better at Charms and can probably get that door open."

"And?"

"You've got a devious mind and could come up with a cool idea for getting us out of here. Although if I'd known you were going to be like this, I wouldn't have bothered."

Deanna chuckled. "Well, for better or worse, I was who you thought of. Why me, in particular?"

Marlie thought. "Well, I suppose because you're Morticia's opposite."

Deanna choked. "Opposite? How come? I thought Tish was rather similar to me in some ways, but there you go. Why?"

"Well, she's really deceptive and sly, really untrustworthy. Evil." Marlie shuddered.

"And I'm not?" Deanna raised an eyebrow.

Marlie shook her head. "No. You're not." She looked at Deanna all of a sudden, realising for the first time how much she actually respected her dorm mate. "You're mean, horrible and you've got a tongue sharper than a basilisk's, but you've never actually lied to anyone. I always know how I stand with you. You're far from perfect, but I trust you. I guess what I'm trying to say is... you're honest. You are who you are." She faltered, suddenly embarrassed. She glanced at Deanna and saw she was smiling again.

"Come here, you daft, soppy thing, you." Deanna said, not unkindly. She stepped forward, and Marlie found herself enveloped in a hug.

"You're doing well, our kid." Marlie heard Deanna telling her. They broke apart and Marlie looked into Deanna's eyes, now surprisingly warm and friendly.

"Really?" Marlie asked. "Then why am I still stuck here?"

Deanna smiled. "Well, you've still got a long way to go. But by recognising what you need, and respecting the ones who have it, you've made a good start. One which deserves a little reward." She turned to the door and pointed her wand at it. "*Alohomora!*" she cried. A jet of sparks shot out of her wand and hit the door, which promptly unlocked itself and swung open.

"Thanks!" Marlie gasped. Scooping up Snowy and her wand, she ran for the exit. Deanna watched her, saying nothing. Marlie reached the door and turned.

"Well? Aren't you coming?"

Deanna shook her head. "I've got other things to do. This is your fight, I can't hold your hand every step of the way. But I'll return, when you need me."

Marlie was not at all happy about this arrangement, but acquiesced. "Well, OK then. Thanks for your help!"

"It was nothing." Deanna said modestly. "You keep thinking about what I told you. Keep an open mind, and if you get in trouble, just do what I'd do! And Good Luck! You'll need it, mate." And with that, she disappeared. Marlie gaped in shock. How on earth had Deanna managed to do that? Apparition was beyond anything Deanna was capable of. However, she had other things to think about. If she was to persuade her mother that there was Dark Arts going on here, she'd need help. And the only person who could talk her mother round was...

"Dad." she whispered. "He'll persuade her." And with that, she ran off towards his workshop. It did not take her long to find her father's workshop. A surprisingly short time, in fact; she never usually got there that quickly. Hoping beyond hope that Morticia was still off with the Weasleys, she pushed the door open and went in.

Mr. Lovegood's workshop was a veritable Aladdin's cave of junk, a techie's treasure trove, the Nirvana of nerds. Bits and pieces everywhere, tools scattered around, plans

pinned to the walls, you could never be sure what Mr. Lovegood was working on, but it was always interesting to find out. Mrs. Lovegood avoided the place if at all possible. While tolerant of her husband's little eccentricities, she regarded them with the amused air of a mother watching her child at play. Mike appeared to share his mother's views, while Sukey was quite frankly terrified of the place. Only Marlie had ever really shown an interest, and she had proved quite an avid pupil. Which is why it was such a shock for her to suddenly hear her father speaking to someone.

"Now this, my dear, is something I'm particularly proud of. I've heard you and your brother complaining so often about not being able to listen to your music at school, that I've decided to do something about it. This is something I like to call a Walkmage. A tape player adapted for a magical environment so you and your brother can play music at school! You two will be the pride of your house, what's it called again?"

If Marlie had been surprised before, it was nothing to how she felt when she heard the reply.

"Slytherin, Daddy." she heard Morticia giggle. Marlie stepped forward meaningfully. Morticia was sitting in Marlie's usual place, with a look of adoration on her face as she listened to her father. Both of them heard her come in and turned to look at her. Morticia was wearing her usual grin of triumph. Mr. Lovegood just seemed confused.

"Can I help you, miss?" he asked.

"Dad, it's me, Marlie." Marlie said, panicky. "I need your help, there's Dark Arts stuff going on, you've got to talk to Mum."

Mr. Lovegood looked even more confused now. "You can't be Marlie, she's right here." He indicated Morticia, who looked even more smug.

"Ignore her, Daddy, she's not important." Morticia hissed softly. "She's not the real Marlie, she doesn't know how to be. Not anymore." She gave Marlie her most contemptuous look yet. Mr. Lovegood did as Morticia bade him, and began explaining the inner workings of the Walkmage to her. Marlene, unable to bear it anymore, turned tail and ran, sobbing as if her heart was about to break.

Chapter Twelve: A Witch Alone

Weeks passed. Still, Marlene showed no signs of waking. Luella and Rianne went to visit every week without fail, to give Marlie encouragement, but with no apparent effect. Deanna felt pangs of frustration every time the two of them returned from the hospital wing with the same unhappy looks on their face.

"Is she any better?" Deanna asked, hoping for but not expecting good news.

Luella shook her head. "No change. Just keeps tossing and turning, moaning. She sounds like she's having a hell of a time in there."

"Who would have thought our favourite little ray of sunshine would have such a traumatic inner life?" Rianne deadpanned. "What's happened to her in the past? Nothing!" A trace of bitterness laced those words. Both Deanna and Luella guessed what Rianne was thinking, but decided not to probe any further.

"She keeps mentioning you quite a bit, though." Luella said, changing the subject. "Doesn't she, Ri?"

Rianne seemed to come out of whatever trance she had been in. "Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes, she says your name quite a bit. I don't know what sort of effect you've had on the poor kid, but evidently you've had a pretty big impact."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? What's she been saying about me? I'm not torturing her, am I?"

Rianne shook her head. "No, no. She seems quite hacked off at you about something, though. Keeps shouting at you, demanding you tell her something. Don't know what, but I wish you'd put her out of her misery and tell her, because it's getting dull."

Deanna just chuckled. "Wish I could! But I'm not hiding anything from her. And I couldn't tell her anyway, she's asleep."

Luella seemed thoughtful. "I don't think it's something you actually know, necessarily. This is the Deanna in Marlie's head we're talking about, not the real Deanna. I think it might be that her psyche's trying to tell her something, and just keeps throwing out clues for her to work it out. And because Marlie has experienced Deanna as the sort to taunt and tease with bits of information like that, that's how it's delivering it to her."

"Either that, or her dark side has just thought of a new way to torment her, and is using the Deanna Within to do it." Rianne said irritably. "It doesn't help us though, does it?"

"No, you're right." Deanna said briskly. "We need to stop analysing and get on with things. I don't know if you two are aware of this, but it's nearly December. Which

means it's time for us to up the stakes." She looked meaningfully at them. "It's time for me to come out as a Marlie-phobe."

Luella felt a pang of sadness at this. So far, things had all been very subtle and under the surface. Now they were about to explode big time. How was she going to handle fighting with her very best friend? Even knowing that they were pretending didn't help. In fact, a genuine fight might have been preferable; at least she wouldn't have to lie.

"So how do we go about it?" Rianne asked calmly. She at least didn't seem affected. But then, expecting Rianne to show it if she had been was foolish at best. Rianne had been the very essence of self-containment ever since confronting Debra.

Deanna was speaking again. "Well, it's been going well so far. I've been making the odd snide comment from time to time, and I think I've made the other Slytherins suspect something. I think people are beginning to realise that I've hardly even seen Marlie either. And I must congratulate you both on the superb job you're doing of pairing up together and subtly excluding me. Anyone would think we'd had a falling out." Luella winced at the sarcasm, but it was true. She was getting along genuinely well with Rianne, and she couldn't blame Deanna for feeling a bit left out. After all, she and Rianne were the more academically inclined of the four, and Deanna was left cold by constant discussions of homework. Marlie's absence was beginning to make itself felt - she had never been one for her studies either and her idleness had kept them from spending all their time working. Now, however, Luella and Rianne appeared to spend their time studying together, leaving Deanna on her own. However, there was one advantage. It would make it that much easier for Deanna to break away and infiltrate Crabbe's inner circle. But Luella did not want a pretend fight for Marlie's sake turning into a real one.

"So the foundations are there." Rianne commented. "We just need to get the building underway. So when do we go public, then?"

"How soon do you think the tape recorder will be ready?" Deanna asked quietly.

"Soon." Rianne answered. "It's going very smoothly, Mr. Lovegood thinks it'll be ready by Christmas for certain, especially now he's got all the bits in."

"Excellent. So we have about a month for me to gain Crabbe's trust. Hopefully, I'll be in there enough to get a confession out of him by the time the tape recorder gets here." Deanna seemed thoughtful. "It only remains for us to have the mother of all bust ups as publicly as possible. So how shall we do that? Luella, any thoughts?"

Luella started at the mention of her name. "Er... no, not really. We should do it soon though."

Rianne appeared to have been thinking about this. "Well, we need to do it while the common room's pretty full for maximum impact. Which it will be now winter's drawing in. Especially later in the evening. So, my plan is this. Lu and me go off to see Marlie again. We spend a couple of hours there and come back. Deanna asks what we've been up to, we say we've been visiting Marlie and make it pretty bloody clear

that we're not happy she never goes. Argument escalates from there and we end up having a fight. See if we can draw in the rest of the house too. Could be fun."

Deanna grinned. "Could be! Assuming Mike Lovegood doesn't kick my head in."

Rianne was dismissive. "He won't. He's a gentleman. He might smash a chair or two up though. Or hex you."

"Yeah, right. I may be only a first year, but I'm still the fastest draw in the school." Deanna didn't seem worried. Luella wished she shared her confidence. But she couldn't help but have grave misgivings about this plan.

They decided to do it a few days later. It was pouring with rain and bitterly cold outside. All the Slytherins were huddled in the common room, trying to keep warm. The Serpent's Nest was underground, so it never got really cold there, however it was never really warm either. The fire was blazing, but it didn't dispel the dampness in the air.

Luella had gone with Rianne to see Marlie, as agreed. Leaving Deanna sitting quietly in the Nest with her Charms homework. However, it was fair to say she wasn't really concentrating that hard. Her mind kept wandering upstairs to the hospital wing, and forward in time to what would happen when the others got back. Deanna was by no means a coward, but that didn't mean she was looking forward to it. She might be devious and manipulative, but that didn't mean she lacked ethics. Far from it. Playing with the emotions of someone she didn't care for was nothing, but fighting with a friend was something else. Could she live with herself after this?

A little voice inside her head began arguing with her. *Luella's living with herself, though, isn't she?* Cut that out, she thought. Luella's my friend, she doesn't like doing this anymore than me. *Oh no?* the voice said. *She's not exactly averse to having Rianne as her best friend, is she? Rather enjoying herself, you know. She only hung around with you at school because you were both outsiders. Now she's not the odd one out, she's taken the first opportunity to find a new friend and forget about you.*

That's not true! Deanna told herself fiercely. Luella wouldn't do that, she wouldn't. She wouldn't turn her back on a friend. She's just hanging around with Rianne because I've got to get friendly with Crabbe. But doubt was creeping in. *Is that so?* the voice was saying. *Touching, but oh so naive. Not everyone's as loyal as you are, Deanna.* She bit her lip. Had she misread Luella? Was she as trustworthy as she thought? But she's the Slytherin Redeemer, Deanna thought desperately. I saw the Serpent with my own eyes!

Not necessarily. After all, it was only a rumour that Voldemort was the first child. What if Voldemort hadn't made the Serpent rise, and Luella was the first to do so? That would mean...

Deanna brushed the thought aside. Luella couldn't be a Dark witch, it just wasn't in her nature. However, she was still enjoying herself just a little too much with Miss Stormosi...

Such were her thoughts when Luella and Rianne returned. Both looked drained. Luella looked terrified. Deanna merely glanced at her coldly, resentment removing any trace of warmth.

Lucas Vetinari was playing Exploding Snap by the fire with Alex Lynch and Chris Bryant. All three boys turned to look at Rianne as she approached them, Luella not far behind.

"Well?" Lucas asked gently. "How is she?" Next to him, Chris looked hopefully at Rianne desperate for any good news. Rianne shook her head sadly.

"No change." Rianne sank into a chair, weary beyond words. "Just keeps whimpering and crying for her parents. Poor girl." They fell silent. Chris looked like he was trying not to cry.

Deanna gathered her strength. It was now or never. With the thought of Luella preferring Rianne to her to stiffen her resolve, she plunged right into it. Rianne's earlier words came back to her.

"Who would have thought everyone's favourite little ray of sunshine would have such traumas in her past?" she said sarcastically. The others turned to look at her. Rianne had a knowing look in her eyes. Luella looked scared out of her wits. The boys were regarding her with looks of fury.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Lucas said quietly, his eyes glittering with barely concealed rage.

"Meaning," Deanna said, sounding more calm than she felt, "that what has Lovegood got in the way of inner demons? She's been spoilt, pampered and indulged every moment of her life since she was born. What has she got to cry about? I don't know why you all feel so sorry for her."

Rianne spoke up. Her eyes twinkled in the firelight. "What would you know, Tyler? You never liked her before, and you've only visited her once since. You've not had to endure her screaming for help. Or mercy." She looked thoughtful. And the look in her eyes spoke, not of anger, but of amusement. She was enjoying this?!

Deanna gave in to the growing feelings of hate and resentment. If they wanted a fight, so be it.

Lucas was speaking again. "What is it with you, anyway, Tyler? Is there anyone you actually like? What has Marlie done to upset you?"

"She's a spoilt brat who thinks the world revolves around her. From day one, she's been Daddy's little princess, everyone's golden girl. She thinks she's so perfect, and it makes me sick! That's what she's done to upset me!" Deanna was livid.

"She's not spoilt!" Chris cried out. He was visibly trembling, but looked determined to speak out and brave Deanna's wrath. He gulped and continued. "She's a lovely girl, really charming and sweet. She's not selfish. You're the one who's selfish!"

Deanna, for once, was lost for words. Lucas, suddenly appearing to comprehend matters, spoke up in wonder.

"Why, Tyler," he drawled, "I do believe you're jealous!"

Deanna started. "Jealous? Why would I be jealous of *her*?" She spat the last word out as if it was poison. Lucas was grinning from ear to ear.

"Why wouldn't you be, you mean? She's popular, pretty and has a father who cares about her. All things conspicuously lacking in your life." He sneered contemptuously at her. Deanna felt herself go scarlet with rage and humiliation. He was right, she'd have given anything for the looks and popularity Marlie had. And there was nothing she wouldn't have done to have a father-daughter relationship like Marlie's with Mr. Lovegood. But she'd rather have died than let anyone else see that. The other boys were beginning to grin. Rianne's expression was neutral, but she had raised her eyebrows. The look on Luella's face was what really did it for Deanna, though. Sorrow mixed with an unmistakable air of pity. Deanna turned roughly away from her to face Lucas again.

"She's an stupid, arrogant, worthless little bitch who's been practically begging for something like this to happen since day one!" Deanna hissed at him. "It was only a matter of time before someone saw through her little charade, and decided to send her on the ultimate in self-improvement courses!" She felt her voice rising, and noticed the entire common room regarding her with shock, but she didn't care. Staring wildly around, she let her anger carry her where it would.

"And you know something else?" she snarled. "I'm glad! Glad someone finally saw her for what she was! Glad someone had the intelligence to see through her! Glad someone finally put her in her place." She paused and looked around the room. Her eyes met those of Dexter Crabbe, who was looking at her with surprised admiration. Satisfaction rose in her. It was working. Got him! she thought. She returned her attention to her fellow first years. They were all looking at her with shock, even Luella and Rianne. In fact, especially Luella and Rianne. Although Deanna couldn't help thinking that Rianne looked rather impressed.

The massed Slytherins, for once, were lost for words. Slowly, from the far side of the room, Mike Lovegood was getting up and approaching her. Deanna quailed before his gaze. His face was impassive, but his eyes flashed fire at her.

He came up to her, and gazed coldly into her eyes. "Take that back." he hissed at her.

Deanna trembled but was determined to show no fear. "No." she whispered softly.

Mike drew himself in. His eyes gleamed savagely. "You little..." He composed himself, before speaking in tones of cold disdain. "If you were a boy, you'd be fighting me off right now. But as it is... you're not worth the effort." A pregnant pause filled the air. Then...

"Get out." he said quietly. "Get out of my sight. You're a disgrace to the name of Slytherin. Well? What are you waiting for? GET OUT!" he roared at her. Deanna's nerve broke at this, and she ran for the exit into the rest of the school.

Luella watched in torment. She desperately wanted to run after her and comfort her, but a touch of Rianne's hand stopped her.

"Let her go." she murmured. "She's excelled herself this time; if you go running after her, you'll blow it all." Luella nodded mutely. She was close to tears. That had been an amazing bit of acting. If it had been acting. And Luella knew Deanna too well to be fooled by that. Holding herself quietly, she made for her dorm and the comforting feeling of Sooty on her lap.

It was much later when Deanna finally returned to the common room. It appeared deserted, for which Deanna was exceedingly grateful. She didn't think she could handle another confrontation like that. Feeling sick inside, she made for her dorm. However, before she reached the door, a voice stopped her progress.

"Wait up, Tyler." She recognised the voice instantly. Crabbe. She turned. There he was, sitting in the corner with his friends, Clarissa Parkinson and Marcus Goyle.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

Crabbe beckoned her over. Curious, she went over to him and took the seat he indicated.

Crabbe and his friends were all looking at her with interest. "Did you mean it back then?" Crabbe asked with curiosity. "About Lovegood."

Deanna felt her heart leap. This was easier than she had ever dreamed of.

"Of course I meant it." she said, her self-assurance returning. "Can't stand her, never have. Her only redeeming feature was that she was good at Quidditch, but now she's not even got that." She forced herself to sneer.

All three of them were smiling evilly at each other. Deanna was not at all sure she liked the looks on their faces. Clarissa was speaking now.

"You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter, aren't you? The famous Auror."

Deanna nodded. Goyle took up the conversation. "When's your birthday, Tyler?"

"16th July." Deanna said, a trace of irritation colouring her words. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason." Goyle smiled. "So, can we take it you're not speaking to your little friends at the moment?"

"Doesn't look like it." Deanna said lightly. "They all think Marlene's wonderful."

Crabbe leaned close to her. "Well, they're obviously not very bright, then. We've never liked her either. Glad to see there's someone else whose Slytherin instincts are working." He smiled at her. "We've been watching you closely for a while now. And we think you've got potential. A lot of potential." He paused. Deanna waited with baited breath. What did he mean?

"Potential for what?" she asked, cautiously.

Crabbe smiled enigmatically. "Well, we don't think you're ready to know that yet. But we're quite impressed by you, Tyler. Hang around with us, you could learn a lot. Maybe get your own back on that Mike Lovegood and Lucas Vetinari." He flashed his teeth in a smile that had about as much warmth as a Siberian midwinter. Deanna smiled nervously. He was worrying her greatly. Nevertheless, in order to avenge Marlie, she had to get close to him.

She flashed him her brightest smile. "I'm sure I could. I've heard you're really clever."

Clarissa laughed quietly. Goyle grinned. Crabbe's features twisted into a leer.

"I like you more and more every time I see you, Tyler. Well, I daresay we'll talk more on this soon. Time we all turned in, I think." And with that, the conversation was at an end.

Luella and Rianne were waiting for her when she returned to her dorm. Rianne was gazing at her in awe. Luella, however, looked concerned.

"Deanna, are you OK?" she said, every word shot through with worry. "You looked really bad back then."

"I'm fine." Deanna said shortly.

Rianne seemed ecstatic. "Deanna, that was an amazing performance! You were wonderful. There's not a Slytherin here who doesn't think you hate Marlie now. Very convincing. Crabbe'll want you for his little gang in no time!"

Deanna nodded. "And how right you are. Approached me as I came in, told me how impressed with me he was. Wanted me to join his gang, said I had potential. I'm in there."

Rianne grinned widely. "Fantastic! All you have to do now is win his trust, turn on the old charm and he'll be confessing in no time! Should be no problem."

Luella did not share Rianne's joy. Deanna had an empty, desolate look in her eyes, and Luella feared for her.

"Deanna, are you sure you're OK?" she asked. "That was a pretty harrowing scene for all of us, it must have affected you pretty badly."

Deanna shrugged. "I told you, I'm fine. It'll take more than a few tantrums from Pretty Boy Lovegood to bother me. Now I'm going to bed. Goodnight." And with that, she drew the hangings shut. Rianne also retired to bed after that. Luella, however, lay awake with Sooty nestled on her purring for a long time after that. All was clearly not well with Deanna, but how to do anything about her? Deanna was stubborn, and prouder than Snape. Getting her to admit she was hurting was a near impossible task. Beyond even her at the moment.

The after-effects did not take long to become apparent. Lucas Vetinari had obviously had a council with the other boys, for none of them would even acknowledge Deanna. The older Slytherins were little kinder. Mike was a very popular figure and few of them had any sympathy for the upstart young first year. However, Crabbe and his gang went out of their way to be nice to Deanna, and she soon found herself spending most of her free time with them.

Relations with Luella and Rianne were not as good as they could be. Given that they were obliged to spend most of their time ignoring her, and thus were spending most of their time hanging around together, Deanna was beginning to feel very hacked off at both of them. Not to mention lonely. Crabbe and company might be talking to her, but it wasn't the same as having Luella to hang around with. Plus she was rapidly discovering that they were more than capable of beating her at her own game in vindictiveness. They were always making fun of weaker and less able children, including Chris Bryant and Luella, who they referred to as 'Mudbloods'. Deanna, brought up to believe that only Death Eaters used that term for Muggle-borns, found it sticking in her throat, especially directed at her own best friend.

"What have I become?" she whispered to Snowy one night as Luella and Rianne slept. "I'm calling my own best friend a Mudblood!" She wiped tears from her eyes, remembering what her mother had said to her before leaving her on the Hogwarts Express.

"Look after Luella." Caitlin had said. "You know she's special, you know she's our hope. And you know she's vulnerable. Look after her, she's not as strong as you are. She needs you." And Deanna had sworn to help her all she could. Now look at her. She'd hardly spoken to Lu in a week. And she'd actually used the term Mudblood. Deanna might be as manipulative as they come, but she had her scruples and right now every single one was lying in the dust in ruins. She had to shut her eyes when washing herself in the morning, in case she caught a glimpse of her reflection. The accusing look in her reflection's eyes was something she just couldn't face anymore.

The worst thing of all was not being able to talk to anyone about it. Crabbe and friends were right out. Rianne would be no help, just persuading her it was all for a good end. Luella she was too proud to confide in. Besides, she couldn't bear explaining to Luella that she'd referred to her as "that worthless little Mudblood in my dorm". Caitlin was a non-starter. She'd let her mother down very badly, and had no wish to endure the shame of explaining what she'd become. Melissa Lovegood would have done, but like Rianne, would be too focused on the practicalities to care about how Deanna was feeling. And she didn't trust Snape at all. Deanna began to wish

she'd had siblings, aunts, uncles. Any one of them would have done. But as it was, she had no one. She tickled Snowy under the chin.

"Who do I talk to, Snowy? Any ideas?" She held the cat close to her, enjoying the feel of soft, warm fur and Snowy's warm purring body. "You know, I hope your mum's properly grateful after all this, I don't put myself through all this for just anyone, you know." Then it hit her. Of course! Marlie! Hadn't she been calling out for her? Maybe somewhere Marlie would hear her and listen. She obviously didn't bear as much ill-will towards her as she had done. It was too late to see her now, but tomorrow, straight after Potions last thing, she made up her mind she would slip off to the hospital wing and see Marlie. Feeling much happier, she let Snowy go and curled up in bed. It was not long before she was fast asleep.

Potions passed all too slowly for Deanna. She was now alone on the corner desk, Luella having moved to Marlie's empty seat. Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were seated at the desk in front. Lucas in particular regarded her with an icy sneer of contempt, although Alex gave her a sympathetic look while Lucas wasn't looking.

If Snape noticed the new seating arrangements, he did not say anything. However, as Deanna passed his desk on his way out, he stopped her.

"A word, Miss Tyler." Deanna froze. This was not good news. She hadn't actually done anything wrong, but Snape had a way of making her feel as if she had.

"Sir?" she asked nervously. Luella shot her a concerned look as she left, but was not given a chance to say anything.

Snape motioned her into his office. "I would like to discuss recent events with you. Do not worry. This will not take long." Her suspicions far from being allayed, Deanna followed him in and sat down.

"Miss Tyler, disturbing and strange rumours have reached my ears about you recently. Rumours concerning a fight in the Slytherin common room. About you turning away from your friends and socialising with Dexter Crabbe and his companions. Is this true?"

Deanna hung her head. She acknowledged that this was indeed the case.

Snape seemed mildly alarmed by this. Certainly, he did not seem pleased.

"You surprise me. I thought, after our conversation on the night Miss Lovegood was taken ill, you would be the last person to have anything to do with Crabbe. Certainly I find it hard to believe that you have abandoned your closest friend for him. An explanation would not go amiss, Miss Tyler." He regarded her severely.

Deanna gulped. She most certainly did not wish to tell him everything. However, some kind of answer was clearly required. And she simply couldn't think of a decent excuse. So she opted for the truth.

"I'm sorry, sir. I would tell you if I could, but I can't! I've got my reasons, though. Please believe me."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "At least you are not attempting to lie to me. However, I think that a more substantive reply is called for here. Don't you think so?"

Deanna looked at him in desperation. What to tell him? "Sir, believe me, I do care for my friends still. And I don't trust Crabbe. But..." She thought hard. "Sir," she said tentatively, "have you ever been in a situation where you know who you are and what you stand for, but for various reasons, you've been forced to act as though you are the complete opposite? That you've got a moral purpose, but have to act immorally in order to achieve it? Because that's me now. I know Crabbe's bad news, but for reasons of my own, I've got to hang around with him. I've got to be what I'm not in order to do what I need to. Do you understand me?" She gazed into his eyes, willing him please, please, understand. Please know what I'm talking about.

To her surprise, Snape's expression softened. His eyes met hers, and she was amazed to read there complete understanding.

"Yes, Deanna." he said quietly. "I have been in that situation myself. And I think I understand you." Deanna felt herself go limp with relief. "You do?"

"Oh yes. I think I know exactly what you are up to. And I respect you greatly for it. However, as someone who has been there before you, I feel bound to give you some advice." He leaned over the desk, his eyes burning intensely into hers. "Play a role all you like, but never forget that it is only a role. Never forget who you are and why you're doing what you're doing. Because there is always the danger that you will become too deeply part of what you are infiltrating, and suddenly you are no longer who you once were but someone completely different. And I do not think you will like what you become. Take care, Deanna." He sat back, still gazing at her with that direct, intense stare.

Deanna looked back in him. He was now beginning to worry her, no doubt about that. Yet strangely, she felt her earlier distaste for him fading. Instead, she now felt a certain bond with him, a certain intimacy. So he too had pretended to be bad for reasons of his own. Interesting.

"I think I know what you mean, sir." she said quietly. "And... don't worry. I'll be OK. I haven't forgotten what I'm doing it for."

Snape nodded. "Good. Because it would be a great loss to see you waste your talents. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Deanna shook her head. "I don't think so..." Then something did occur to her. "Sir, the not being able to look yourself in the mirror, does that ever go away?" A lump came into her throat.

Snape gazed at her almost tenderly. "I believe it does, when the guilt that caused it is removed. For you, I believe it will end when Miss Lovegood recovers and whoever poisoned her is punished."

"When did it go away for you?" Deanna asked. At this Snape lowered his eyes.

"As yet, I don't believe it has." he said softly. Then, the gentle, reflective mood seemed to pass, and he was his usual irascible self.

"Well, I think I've kept you talking for quite long enough.", he said irritably.

"Doubtless you have things you have to do. I shall see you again in Wednesday's lesson. Good day, Miss Tyler." And with that, he ushered her out.

Chapter Thirteen: A Meeting of Minds

Deanna lost no time in racing up to the hospital wing. Marlie had by this time been moved into a room of her own, as the other patients had complained about the noise. She was however quiet when Deanna went to see her. Lying very still and silent, her hair spread out on the pillow, Marlene's appearance could best be described as consumptive.

Deanna sat next to the bed and regarded her coolly.

"I hope you're satisfied with yourself, Marlie. Thanks to your naivety, I've lost all standing I ever had here." She was overcome with a rush of emotion, and burst into tears as all the unhappiness of the past few weeks overwhelmed her.

"Oh, Marlie!" she sobbed. "What am I going to do? You have no idea how bad it is, no idea... No one else will speak to me, I'm not hanging around with Lu anymore, and I have to spend all my free time with the bastard who poisoned you!" She wiped her eyes and composed herself.

"I'm ingratiating myself with Crabbe and company so I can get them to confess what they did to you. Your dad's building the tape recorder you designed so I can tape it and use it as evidence to get them expelled. Thing is though, I have to be around the most horrible people in Slytherin. And you know what? Everyone else thinks I'm like that too! Mike, he thinks I'm the lowest of the low. And you should see the looks Lucas Vetinari keeps giving me. Know what else?" Deanna said miserably. "I'm starting to believe it too! I called my own best friend a Mudblood, do you know that?" She held her head in her hands. "I'm so scared, Marlie, so scared! So scared I'll turn into one of them. Just so afraid. I wish you were awake, Marlie. Wish you were around. I know we never got on that well, but you're not so bad. Not really." She looked up and began to stroke Marlie's hair. Deanna smiled and began to look at Marlie almost fondly.

"You know, I'm beginning to realise exactly how important you were. I mean, Lu and Rianne, with them it's always work, work, work. You were the one who kept us entertained. Kept things fun. Gods damn it, Marlie, why did I never see it before? Our little Gang of Four falls apart without you. I always thought that if anything happened to you, it'd be me and Lu together and Ri on her own, but it's not happening is it? Instead, they're off together, and I'm the lonely one. Gods, Marlie, come back!"

Please." Her voice trailed into a whisper. She wiped away a tear that ran down her cheek.

Marlie stirred in her sleep. Her lips parted and suddenly she spoke.

"Don't cry." she whispered. Deanna started. "What?" she gasped.

"Deanna, don't cry. What is it? What's wrong?" Marlie whispered. Her eyes were shut, but Deanna sensed a change in her, almost as if she was closer to consciousness than she had been.

"Marlie," she began, her voice picking up, "can you hear me?"

"Course I can." Marlie muttered sleepily, "You're right here. You heard me well enough in the cellar, why not out here?"

If Deanna had been confused before, it was nothing compared to how she felt now.

"Cellar? What cellar? And we're inside, Marlie. In the hospital wing."

Marlie frowned in her sleep. "Can't be right." she whispered. "We're at my house, by the stream. And you were in our cellar. You were right there, you spoke to me, kept talking in riddles, but you let me out. You knew why I was here, you kept taunting me with it but wouldn't tell me. Don't you remember?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. I've never been to your house."

"Well you're right here. So that's not true." Marlie shifted position. "Where do you want me to come back to? Why were you crying? What's happening, Deanna? Tell me. I'm so confused."

"You're confused?" Deanna snapped. "You're the one saying we're at your house! Listen, you're asleep, you're dreaming. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I wish you'd bloody snap out of it. I want you to wake up, come back to Hogwarts. Please?"

"Why?" Marlie asked.

"Because..." Deanna stopped. There were a thousand and one reasons why she wanted Marlie back but none of them seemed right. In the end, she just let her heart guide her.

"Because I miss you." she said gently. Marlie's eyes flicked open suddenly as she gasped in astonishment. But she wasn't really awake, wasn't really seeing anything. They closed again.

"Do you really?" she asked, a smile playing around her lips.

"Yes!" Deanna said, feeling very uncomfortable with all this.

"Alright then." Marlie said calmly. "Hogwarts it is. I'm on my way." Suddenly, her eyes shot open again. A look of absolute shock took hold of her. "Deanna! Deanna, wait!" she cried.

"I'm here, I'm right here." Deanna said, her heart racing. She took hold of Marlie's arm, trying to calm her.

Marlie closed her eyes, now looking angry and fed up. "Where did you go? I wish you'd stop disappearing like that. Damn you, Tyler. First the cellar, now this. Damn you, damn..." Her voice trailed off into silence. Her body subtly changed and she was fast asleep again.

Deanna just stared in amazement. Had she been having a conversation with Marlie? It certainly seemed like it. But Marlie was meant to be trapped in her own head, incapable of interacting with the outside world. So how could she have been able to hear what Deanna was saying? And what did Marlie mean by the encounter in the cellar? She'd never even been to Marlie's house before, didn't even know they had a cellar. And as for having all the answers, that was laughable. She thought back to Luella talking about how Marlie had been demanding she tell her something. Maybe that was it, she'd appeared to her in the Lovegoods' cellar, trying to give her a clue as to what was going on, and Marlie thought she was seeing the dream Deanna again. Her mind reeling, she got to her feet. She needed to think, and then she needed to talk it over with someone who knew everything there was to know about potions. Snape.

Marlie raced out of her father's workshop as fast as she could, sobbing helplessly. Even her own father had fallen under Morticia's spell. Her father, who regarded her as the apple of his eye, his little princess, and not even he could resist the devil child's spell. Which left Marlie with precious few options. Her strategy in life had always been, if she couldn't sort it out herself, run to Dad. And for the very first time, it had failed her. Leonard Lovegood hadn't even recognised her. Adding insult to injury, he'd even stolen her idea for a Walkmage, and shared it with Morticia. That was meant to be me there! she thought, furious. Me sharing the plans with him, the two of us building it together. And now he's doing that with her! It wasn't fair, she thought, brushing the tears from her eyes.

She looked up. In her haste, she'd run to her favourite spot, the stream at the bottom of the Lovegood's garden where she'd frequently played with Mike and the Weasleys, and hidden when she wanted to be alone. And now she found she'd come here. Well, it made sense. This had always been her safe place. And she wanted nothing more right now than to be alone.

But she wasn't alone. As she neared the place, she saw a small black-clad figure hunched up by the stream. It was a dark-haired girl her own age. Crying. Silently, she drew nearer, wanting to find who this intruder, who'd dared invade her special place, was.

The girl was speaking aloud. Marlie gasped then sagged with relief as she recognised the voice. Deanna. Well, at least it was one person she could rely on. She still didn't

like her much, but she did at least trust her. She listened carefully and was surprised to hear her own name.

"Oh, Marlie!" she was sobbing. "What am I going to do? You have no idea how bad it is, no idea... No one else will speak to me, I'm not hanging around with Lu anymore, and I have to spend all my free time with the bastard who poisoned you!" She wiped her eyes and sniffed. Marlie looked on, bewildered. Poison? Who'd poisoned her?

"But I feel fine." she whispered softly. And why was Deanna lonely? What had she done to alienate even Luella? Marlie listened on.

"I'm ingratiating myself with Crabbe and company so I can get them to confess what they did to you." Deanna continued. Did what to me? Marlie wondered. Did he poison me? Marlie thought back. A memory was making itself felt. Crabbe drinking her health only a few days ago at the victory party. She hadn't trusted him then. Had the drink been poisoned? But why am I OK now? she thought, confused. Still, if I have been and Deanna's trying to befriend him to get a confession out of him, that would explain why she's so upset...

Deanna was still speaking. "Your dad's building the tape recorder you designed so I can tape it and use it as evidence to get them expelled."

So that was how he got the Walkmage plans! Marlie thought, cheering up. Deanna had sent them to him so he could build it, and then Deanna could tape a trick confession out of Crabbe. Very ingenious. Marlie felt a chill go up her spine suddenly. She was beginning to realise why her family didn't recognise her. I'm dead, she thought, horrified. I'm dead, and I'm a ghost. Which is why they all think I'm a stranger. And that Morticia's taken the opportunity to take my place now I'm not around. But that didn't explain why the Weasleys recognised her, and her mother had been able to imprison her. And it didn't even begin to account for Deanna being here.

"Thing is though, I have to be around the most horrible people in Slytherin." Deanna was weeping. "And you know what? Everyone else thinks I'm like that too! Mike, he thinks I'm the lowest of the low. And you should see the looks Lucas Vetinari keeps giving me. Know what else?" Deanna said miserably. "I'm starting to believe it too! I called my own best friend a Mudblood, do you know that?" She held her head in her hands. "I'm so scared, Marlie, so scared! So scared I'll turn into one of them. Just so afraid."

Marlie felt herself softening. Deanna seemed so unhappy. She felt like she should be gloating, but somehow she couldn't work up any enthusiasm. In fact, she was actually feeling sorry for her. Deanna seemed so frightened and lost. Such a change, seeing her like this.

"I wish you were awake, Marlie." Deanna cried out. "Wish you were around. I know we never got on that well, but you're not so bad. Not really." Marlie gasped. I'm asleep? No, I can't be. I'm awake. I'm here! Unless I'm dreaming. Which makes a lot of sense, but... Marlie shook her head. She couldn't fathom it out at all. Frowning, she walked over to Deanna and sat beside her. Deanna didn't seem to notice. She just kept talking. Addressing the air. Very odd. Talking to Marlie yet ignoring her.

"You know, I'm beginning to realise exactly how important you were. I mean, Lu and Rianne, with them it's always work, work, work. You were the one who kept us entertained. Kept things fun. Gods damn it, Marlie, why did I never see it before? Our little Gang of Four falls apart without you. I always thought that if anything happened to you, it'd be me and Lu together and Ri on her own, but it's not happening is it? Instead, they're off together, and I'm the lonely one. Gods, Marlie, come back! Please." Her voice trailed into a whisper. She wiped away a tear that ran down her cheek.

Marlie raised an eyebrow. She actually wanted her to come back? She actually missed her? Well, if that wasn't a miracle, nothing was. Deanna must be seriously unhappy. Marlie grinned to herself. About time Deanna saw the error of her ways. So why didn't she feel triumphant? In fact, reluctant as she was to admit it, she actually wanted nothing more to reach out and give Deanna a hug.

"Don't cry." she said softly. Deanna started. "What?" she gasped. She looked up and turned to face Marlie. Marlie gasped in surprise. Deanna seemed pale, almost transparent. In fact, Marlie could see the stream through her. As if she wasn't really here at all. Quite unlike everyone else Marlie had encountered, and definitely nothing like she'd been in the cellar earlier. There, she'd been real enough to touch.

"Deanna, don't cry. What is it? What's wrong?" Marlie whispered. The look of shock on Deanna's face was frightening her. What? she thought. You were talking to me, I'm here, don't look at me like that!

"Marlie," she began, her voice picking up, "can you hear me?"

"Course I can." Marlie snapped, "You're right here. You heard me well enough in the cellar, why not out here?"

Deanna's face was a very picture of confusion. Well, thank the gods I'm not the only one who hasn't got a clue what's happening, Marlie thought.

"Cellar? What cellar? And we're inside, Marlie. In the hospital wing."

Marlie frowned at her. Hogwarts hospital wing? She looked about her. No, definitely her childhood haunt by the stream. "Can't be right." she said, shaking her head. "We're at my house, by the stream. And you were in our cellar. You were right there, you spoke to me, kept talking in riddles, but you let me out. You knew why I was here, you kept taunting me with it but wouldn't tell me. Don't you remember?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. I've never been to your house."

Marlie threw up her hands in frustration. Couldn't Deanna see where she was? "Well, you're right here. So that's not true." Deanna didn't react. Marlie sighed and decided to change the subject. Deanna obviously wasn't aware of either their earlier encounter or where she was now. "Where do you want me to come back to? Why were you crying? What's happening, Deanna? Tell me. I'm so confused." Marlie looked at her with frustration.

"You're confused?" Deanna snapped. "You're the one saying we're at your house! Listen, you're asleep, you're dreaming. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I wish you'd bloody snap out of it. I want you to wake up, come back to Hogwarts. Please?"

"Why?" Marlie asked. She waited patiently. Might as well pump Deanna for as much information as she could while she was here.

"Because..." Deanna stopped. She seemed lost for words. Her eyes were a melting-pot of emotions.

"Because I miss you." she said gently. Marlie's jaw dropped, but she quickly composed herself. Now she couldn't resist gloating.

"Do you really?" she asked, a smile playing around her lips.

"Yes!" Deanna said, looking very uncomfortable with all this.

"Alright then." Marlie said calmly. "Hogwarts it is. I'm on my way." After all, there didn't seem to be anything left for her here. And her Cleansweep could probably make the journey in six hours or so. Not including breaks. And she wasn't unwilling to see the place again. Quite apart from anything else, it would be good to see Deanna in the flesh and get some answers out of her. She reached out to take Deanna's arm and gasped as her hand went straight through her. Then she noticed that Deanna was fading rapidly.

"Deanna!" she cried. "Deanna, wait!" But it was too late. Deanna had gone. Marlie pounded the ground in fury. "Where did you go? I wish you'd stop disappearing like that. Damn you, Tyler. First the cellar, now this. Damn you, damn you!" Her voice trailed off. Deanna was gone. She lay back on the warm grass, her mind reeling. What had just happened? She tried to make sense of it all. Deanna hadn't seemed here, hadn't seemed real. And she hadn't seemed to be aware of anything going on around her, except Marlie. She'd also had no memory of their previous encounter in the cellar.

Marlie pursed her lips, thinking deeply. Deanna had said she'd been poisoned. By Crabbe, and she was going undercover to get the evidence necessary to punish him. She'd also said that she, Marlie, was asleep, was dreaming, and not able to wake, presumably as an effect of the poison. Marlie fell to considering this. It made a weird kind of sense. After all, dreams were by their very nature weird. And her recent experiences definitely qualified as bizarre by any standards. It was rather cheering to know that out there somewhere were her real friends and family, and that they really recognised her. Another thought. If that was so, and all this was just a product of her own mind, then maybe, just, maybe, the Deannas she'd met were not the same person. The first was a Dream Deanna, trying to help her realise what was happening without actually doing all the work for her. The second was different. In fact, she could well believe that the second time was the real Deanna, who'd somehow managed to break through into the dream and tell her what was really going on.

"So I'm dreaming this." Marlie said in wonder. "Wow." It made sense. But how to wake up? Maybe that was what the first Deanna had meant. She had work out where

she was, what her task was and who Morticia was. Well, she was no nearer to understanding Morticia's identity. But she now knew where she was, and had an inkling of her task.

"I've got to wake up." she said firmly. "I have to find my way out of here. But how?" She gazed desperately at her reflection in the stream. It held still for a moment, then the rushing water shattered it. It reformed just as quickly. Marlie's jaw dropped. Instead of her own face, she saw Deanna smiling back at her. She winked at her before the reflection vanished, to be replaced with her own again. Marlie stared, but that was definitely her own face once more. Deanna was gone again. However, it gave Marlie hope. She was on the right track. This was nothing more or less than her own mind. She wished Luella were here. She seemed to have a very firm grasp of human behaviour and could easily help her to unravel the mysteries of her psyche. However, there was a Deanna helping her, and it seemed she was on the right track so far. She picked Snowy up and stroked him thoughtfully.

"Deanna said she wanted me back at Hogwarts." she said. Well, there must be an inner Hogwarts here. And maybe a Dream Luella to help her. And if Luella wouldn't come to her, she'd go to her.

Marlie leapt to her feet, her mind made up. "Come on, Snowy." she crooned. "You and I are off to Hogwarts." And with that, she headed back to the house to get her broom.

Deanna raced out of the hospital wing as fast as she could. Hoping against hope that Snape was still in his office, she made straight for the Slytherin corridor.

Her luck was in. Snape's classroom was empty, but knocking on his office door produced a reply. Snape flung the door open, scowling.

"What is it... You again?" He seemed less than pleased to see her. "May I inquire as to what is so important that you feel the need to break my door down?"

"Sir," she gasped, clutching her chest. "sir, it's Marlie!"

Snape's expression changed immediately from one of annoyance to one of alarm.

"Miss Lovegood? How is she?" he said sharply.

"Sir, she's still asleep, but... I was talking to her!" Deanna said, eyes wide. "And... she answered! In her sleep! She knew what I was saying to her! She could hear me!"

Snape looked stunned. "You had better come inside." he said curtly. Deanna followed him in and sat down. Corvus fluttered over to her and landed on her shoulder, cawing softly. Deanna stroked him absently and looked around her.

Snape's office was unchanged, except for one thing which she'd not noticed before in her nervousness. On the desk in the corner, a massive array of glassware and a bubbling cauldron clearly indicated that Snape was brewing something up.

"What's that?" Deanna asked.

"A potion." Snape said shortly.

"Which one?" Deanna asked, not to be put off.

"An antidote."

"What, for Marlie? I didn't know Sleeping Death had one." Deanna said, curious.

"It doesn't. Yet." Snape couldn't resist a little boasting.

"Have you found one?" Deanna asked, excitedly.

"Maybe. That is what I was working on before I was so rudely interrupted. Now. Tell me about this conversation you had with Miss Lovegood." Snape leaned forward, listening intently.

Deanna told him everything. When she had finished, Snape sat back and looked thoughtful.

"Well?" Deanna said breathlessly. "What do you think? Is she waking up?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." Snape said calmly. "This is an unexpected development, but not an uncommon one. I have heard of it happening before in some instances. Where a person in a Sleeping Death trance has been able to communicate briefly with someone else."

"And?" Deanna said, barely able to contain herself.

"I gather it occurs when the Sleeper's level of consciousness rises and becomes closer to wakefulness. However, most of the responsibility lies with the one with whom the Sleeper makes contact. Apparently they are able to project themselves into the Sleeper's dream and have some effect on events there. This takes quite a bit of magical effort, although some manage it without even realising. It makes things easier if there is a strong emotional connection between the two of them." He was now regarding Deanna with a great deal of interest.

Deanna began to feel rather nervous. "But sir, I didn't even know what was happening. I didn't even leave my body, I was just talking to her in the hospital wing."

Snape nodded. "Understandable. I would have been very surprised if you had consciously done it. Nevertheless, Miss Lovegood clearly experienced you appearing in her dream and could communicate with you. Admittedly, it was only briefly, and the contact was not a strong one, but it was there. And it was most impressive for an eleven year old." Snape was regarding her intently. "You must have a very close emotional bond with Miss Lovegood."

Deanna laughed. "Well... it's an interesting one. Up until Halloween, I couldn't stand her."

"And yet you are now sacrificing everything to avenge her." Snape said thoughtfully.

"She's hurt. I want revenge." Deanna said simply.

"Why?"

"Because..." Deanna hesitated. "Because she may be a spoilt, manipulative brat who routinely drives me up the wall, but that doesn't mean I don't care about her."

Snape smiled thinly. "You see. She evokes strong and conflicting emotions in you; you hate her one minute, the next you want revenge on her behalf. It is precisely these connections that allow one to intervene in a Sleeping Death trance. Doubtless she feels much the same way about you, or else she would not have allowed you in. Also, it would appear that her own inner Deanna Tyler is acting as her Guide."

"Guide?" Deanna asked, confused.

"A regular part of successful Sleeping Death trances. The Sleeper meets all those with whom she has an emotional bond, and most of them prove hostile to her in some way. However, one proves to be an asset, a helper, who provides assistance and advice along the way, often getting the Sleeper out of tricky situations and providing clues as to what is going on, although never doing all the work for them. Very often, it is not the one who the Sleeper actually likes best, but the one for whom the connection is strongest. It is someone who has the qualities the Sleeper most needs in order to succeed. And surprisingly often, it's someone who they have classed as an enemy." Snape was regarding Deanna with great interest now.

"So she's picked me to help her with her dreams." Deanna said, flatly.

"It would appear so. Another reason you were able to intrude."

"But what does it mean? I mean, now what?" Deanna said, intrigued.

"For us, very little. For her, it may mean the difference between life and death. You have managed to communicate to her that she is asleep and dreaming, and needs to wake up. You would be surprised how difficult it is for Sleeping Death victims to realise that. And yet, it's an essential part of recovering."

Deanna still had one question left unanswered. "Sir, if I was able to do that... what does that mean for me? I mean, do I have special powers or what?"

Snape's earlier irritability returned. "Miss Tyler, I would strongly advise you not to get carried away by the idea of having supernormal abilities. You are a witch. That should be enough for you. Now go, I need to work on my antidote."

Marlie strode purposefully across the Lovegoods' lawn, Snowy in tow. Now that she had an objective in view and was not merely a pawn of capricious fate, she felt strangely confident. In fact, every inch of her being crackled with power.

"I'm ready for you, Morticia." she whispered. For she was becoming certain that waking up would involve defeating the devil child. However, despite her words, she wasn't completely ready for a confrontation just yet.

Which was a shame, because seated on the veranda was the very person. Sitting on the swing chair, kicking backwards and forwards, a horrible parody of girlish innocence, was Morticia, grinning insanely.

Marlie stopped dead. Drawing out her wand, she approached slowly, ready to fight if she had to.

"Out of my way, Morticia." Marlie said grimly.

Morticia giggled. "No." she said.

Marlie glared at her. "Don't make me do anything you'll regret, Tish." she said, in what she hoped was a threatening voice.

Morticia laughed all the harder. "Threatening me, are you? You'll have to do better than that. You don't have the power to unseat me, and we both know it. Give in while you're still unharmed." She smiled fetchingly. Marlie wasn't fooled.

"Never." she said coldly. "I'd never give in to you."

Morticia's smile faded, to be replaced with a look of pure, cold anger. "You will." she said softly. "It's happening already. You won't last forever, Marlene. Eventually, there will come a time when Deanna can't save you, and that cat can't rouse you. And then..." She paused. The manic grin had returned. "Then the tables will be turned, and instead of being your prisoner and scapegoat, I'll have my rightful place. In charge!" She laughed.

Marlie sighed. She had never been impressed by bad guys bragging about their plans, and right now she was too impatient to even bother faking any enthusiasm.

"Ah, to Hades with you, Tish!" she snapped. "Can't you see I've got things to do?" And with that she waved her wand with the first spell that came to her.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she cried. The charm hit Morticia full-on. Her laughter turned to cries of alarm as she began floating in the air. Marlene grinned. True, it wasn't as good as Deanna's efforts, which could make things go flying around, but it wasn't at all bad considering.

Morticia was furious. "You wait, Lovegood, I'll get you back for this! You might have won the battle, but you'll lose the war!" She was clutching on to a pillar, desperately trying not to crash into the roof. Marlie just grinned. Nice to see not everything going Morticia's way for once.

"See ya, Tish! Wouldn't want to be ya!" Marlie called, as she ran past into the house. She vaguely heard Morticia laughing and calling "Too late!" but thought nothing of it as she pushed the door open and darted in.

And pulled up with a start. This wasn't the Lovegoods' hall. It was bigger than the Lovegoods' entire house. She stared around, taking in the suits of armour, the banners, and the huge staircase that dominated the room. This was...

"Hogwarts?" she breathed incredulously. For indeed it was. No doubt about it, she somehow managed to Apparate directly to the Hogwarts Entrance Hall. Which could only mean one thing.

"Deanna was right!" she whispered. "I am dreaming!" Which had interesting implications. Evidently, she did have a great deal of control over events, more than she'd thought. It all made sense. Lost and lonely in the mist, she'd longed for company and Snowy had come. Then she'd wanted nothing more than to go somewhere warm and familiar, so she'd ended up in her childhood nursery. Hunting for her mother, she'd found her virtually straight away. In the cellar, she'd thought of the Weasleys cheering her up, and they'd appeared. And she'd called on Deanna for help, and she'd come. Now she'd wanted to go to Hogwarts, so here she was. Marlie wondered what sort of limits there were to this. Oh, the possibilities...

The place seemed deserted. Glancing out of the window, she saw it was night outside. So after curfew then. Taking advantage of being out, she decided to explore. It would make a nice change to see Hogwarts by night.

She walked for ages along the corridors. Nothing appeared different. A few ghosts drifted past her, but nothing else of note occurred. She was wandering down the Charms corridor, heading for Ravenclaw Tower, reputed to be the location of the Ravenclaw common room, when she nearly tripped over something. She turned, coming face-to-face with Mrs. Norris, dust-coloured cat of Argus Filch, Hogwarts caretaker.

Marlie cursed quietly. Even though she was a devoted cat lover, she found it hard to like Mrs. Norris.

"Get away from here." she hissed. "Shoo!"

The cat did not move. A tapestry on the far wall did though, as Filch himself turned up.

"Ah-ha!" he laughed dementedly. "Thought you'd go prowling around at night, did you? Thought you'd escape did you? Well, tough! No one gets away from old Filch that easily! Come on, you and I are off to see your House Head!"

Great, Marlie thought. I now have to deal with Dream Snape on top of everything else. Impatient suddenly, she cried out "Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four, help your daughter!"

She got her wish. The Slytherin ghost, a dour figure known as the Bloody Baron, drifted lazily through a wall.

"What is all this commotion?" he rumbled. Filch immediately leapt a foot into the air and began trembling.

"I'm taking a student to see Professor Snape. She's out of bounds." He seemed determined not to let the Baron frighten him. The Baron did not appear impressed.

"Out of bounds? In her own realm? No place here is closed to her, surely you know that? Let her go, you foolish little man."

Filch seemed to inflate with fury. "Foolish little... Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four, help your son!"

All three of them paused. Nothing happened. The Baron broke the silence.

"Salazar only sends his aid to those worthy of it. Those who are properly developing their power. Not Squibs like you." the Baron said contemptuously. He idly waved his hand and Peeves appeared. Laughing manically, he immediately began throwing water bombs around, causing Filch to scream in rage and desperately try to clean up. The Baron drifted away, and Marlie followed, glad of a reprieve. However, she turned to look a little more closely at Peeves and saw with horror that he had Morticia's face. She quickly moved away, after the Baron.

"Thank you!" she gasped as they turned the corner.

The Baron regarded her with a look almost of amusement. "Thank you? Why, I merely answered your call. This is your realm, you have the power here. Use it and you will prosper. Allow others to use it for you and you will suffer." He fell silent.

Marlie was still puzzled. "Why did Peeves have Morticia's face?"

The Baron allowed himself a smile. "Morticia and Peeves are kin to each other. Both have power, yet are out of control with no one to guide them. Peeves, luckily for us all, has me, and I can deploy him to great effect. I could not have saved you without him. I keep him in check, so he can interact with the world effectively, and he gives me power, that I may do the same. Morticia is in much the same position."

"But who keeps Morticia in check?" Marlie whispered softly. The Baron smiled thinly.

"I would have thought the answer to that is obvious." he said smugly and drifted away.

"Wait!" Marlie called, but it was too late. The Bloody Baron drifted through a shield bearing the Ravenclaw crest and out of sight. Marlie cursed in frustration. Turning away, she headed back for the Great Hall and the entrance to the dungeons. She had no wish to run into Filch, although now she'd seen him off once, she felt it was unlikely her inner self would choose to use him again. Question was, what would it do to her next?

Chapter Fourteen: Unravelling The Web

It did not take long to find her common room. The Charms corridor turned, and she automatically found herself in the Slytherin Corridor. Marlie grinned. This really wasn't so bad, being trapped in her own psyche, you know. It had its benefits, and Morticia seemed to have taken a back seat. Maybe that Levitation Charm was still holding her back.

The common room was deserted, so she headed for her dorm. She was surprised to find Luella and Rianne sitting in front of the fire, playing chess. They looked up and to Marlie's relief, welcomed her as if nothing had happened.

"Hiya, Marlie." Rianne said cheerfully.

"How've you been?" Luella asked, then cursed as Rianne took advantage of the distraction to take one of her bishops.

"Not bad." Marlie replied. She looked at the chess board. "Who's winning?" There seemed to be rather a lot of white pieces around and not very many black ones.

"Me." Rianne said deftly.

"Yes, the shadow pieces are being held back most effectively at the moment." Luella commented, and Marlie had the feeling that she was not talking about the game. She looked around.

"Where's Deanna?" Marlie asked.

"Busy." Rianne said. "She can't be looking out for you all day."

"Yes, we've all got better things to do than help you psychoanalyse yourself, Marlie." Luella said primly.

"What, like lose at chess?" Marlie grinned.

Luella laughed, then went serious. "If I lose this chess match, all that happens is I lose the match. If you lose yours, we will all cease to exist." She moved one of her rooks. "Tell us how you've been getting on."

So Marlie told them everything that had happened to her. "So now I know this is a dream, and I've got to wake up. But how? And where does Morticia fit in to all this?"

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "You don't know who she is yet? The Baron as good as told you."

"He said she was like Peeves, but I don't know whose job it is to keep her in line." Marlie said, frowning. "If only I knew, then I could get them to call her off."

Luella sighed. "Marlie, are you thinking at all? Who has the power here? Whose realm is this, whose dream? Who has Morticia told you her jailer is?" She gave Marlie her most penetrating Snape Interrogation look. "Think, woman!" she snapped.

Marlie went numb with shock. "You don't seriously mean..." she whispered staring at them both.

Rianne and Luella nodded in unison. Marlie stammered, "But it can't be, I mean, surely... You can't possibly mean me!"

Rianne and Luella broke into grins. "By George, I think she's got it!" Luella said.

"I think she has!" Rianne smiled. "And leave Weasley out of this, he's got nothing to do with it." Luella rolled her eyes.

Marlie was having difficulty coming to terms with this. "But how?" she gasped. "I mean, I don't have power over her, surely? She won't listen to me at all!"

Rianne was dismissive yet kindly. "Of course she doesn't. For eleven years you've been keeping her locked away because you're ashamed of her. Now you can't hold her in anymore, and she's busy taking her revenge."

Luella patiently elaborated. "Think how you'd feel if someone you cared about kept you a prisoner and didn't let you out for eleven years because they didn't think you were good enough for anyone else to know about. Imagine how hurt and angry you'd feel. And imagine what sort of mood you'd be in when you finally got free. That's how Morticia feels now. And it's what you have to deal with if you're going to get free yourself."

Marlie's head was in a whirl. "You mean she's part of me?"

"Of course she is, would she be here if she wasn't?" Rianne snapped. "Think! Remember what Deanna told you. All the clues she gave you."

"Sukey, Mike and Dad didn't even recognise me, they thought she was the real Marlie." Marlie said, choking.

"Exactly." Luella said. "You've been holding back a vital, powerful, part of yourself for so long, you've forgotten who you really are. You no longer even think Morticia's part of you. Which is why your own family don't recognise you anymore. They think Morticia's really you, because you've spent so long pretending to be someone else, you don't know who you are anymore! Consequently, neither do they! Tish is realer than you."

Marlie thought back to Morticia's words. "Ignore her Daddy, she's not important. She's not the real Marlie, she doesn't know how to be. Not any more." It made sense. But which bit of her was she?

"What about everyone else?" Rianne asked her.

"Well," Marlie hesitated. "Mum knew who I was, but blamed me for what Morticia did wrong."

"And?" Luella asked. "What does that tell you? Now you know she's part of you."

"I am responsible for her, aren't I?" Marlie sighed, remembering the Baron's words. "She can't control herself, so I have to do it, stop her from misbehaving."

Rianne and Luella looked at her, pleased. "Yes. You're right." Luella smiled. "Who else is there?"

Marlie thought. "The Weasleys recognised me, but they preferred Morticia." she said softly.

"See?" Rianne smiled. "They see what you're keeping prisoner. And they actually like that other side of you! What does that tell you?"

"They've got no taste?" Marlie suggested.

"No. Try again." Rianne said.

"Er..." Marlie thought. Then it came to her. The words stuck in her throat, but she forced herself to say them.

"Morticia has her good points. She's not completely worthless." she said dully.

Luella and Rianne smiled. "Well done." Luella said gently. "Of course she's not useless, she is buried treasure. Power which you need but which you've denied for so long you don't know how to use anymore. Which is a shame because Morticia could wake you up in an instant."

"Then what?" Rianne said. "Who did you encounter after the Weasleys?"

"Deanna." Marlie said quietly. "She gave me a whole load of clues which I found completely unhelpful at the time, but let me out of the cellar after I worked out that the very things I hated most about her were the ones I most envied."

"Which qualities were those?" Luella asked.

"Emotional honesty. Integrity. Not manipulating my loved ones into making my life easy for me. Knowing I wasn't perfect. Not trying to pretend I was." Marlie said, dully.

"And why do you need them?" Rianne asked.

"Because acting how I have been is what's spawned Morticia." Marlie replied. "Had I been true to myself in the first place, she wouldn't hate me. She wouldn't even be separate, she'd be part of me."

"She isn't separate." Luella said firmly. "She's still part of you. You need to come to some sort of arrangement with her if you want to live. Because she is the only one

who can send you home. And if you don't go home soon, your physical body will die. You will die." Luella's eyes seemed strangely bright.

Rianne took up the conversation. "Listen to me, Marlie. You're doing well and you're reclaiming much of your power. But you are not all-powerful. Morticia is still held back by your charm, and as a result, you are able to draw on a good deal of her power. But when she breaks free, as she surely will soon, that power will be hers again, and she will come after you stronger than before. While she is chained, you are real, and you have power. When she breaks free, she takes over and she is realer than you. Do you get what I'm driving at?" Rianne looked desperate. And in that instant, Marlie understood.

"You won't recognise me!" she whispered. "When she gets out, you won't know who I am anymore!"

Rianne and Luella nodded grimly. "When she's around, we'll all think she's the real you. Unless and until you can bring this fight to an end. That is your task, and your only hope of survival. We are counting on you, Marlie." Luella looked at her intently.

Marlie opened her mouth to respond but was distracted by the door opening. All three turned as Morticia walked in, her Hogwarts cloak swirling about her. All girlishness gone from her, she now wore her hair loose, a Hogwarts uniform which Marlie vaguely noticed had Gryffindor colours and a cold unfathomable look on her face. Luella and Rianne immediately smiled at her, forgetting Marlie completely.

"Hey, Marlie." Rianne smiled.

"You're out late tonight." Luella remarked.

"I got held up." Morticia said simply. "Someone kept me hanging around for ages." She showed no trace of amusement at this choice of phrase. "I'm tired. Let's turn in." With that, she climbed into Marlie's bed and drew the curtains. Luella and Rianne extinguished the fire without a word and climbed into their own beds. However, just before she drew the curtains, Luella turned, looked penetratingly into Marlie's eyes for just an instant then went to bed. Marlie, left alone, and suddenly dog-tired, clambered into Deanna's vacant bed and fell asleep.

Snape regarded Marlene's sleeping form for a while. His experimental antidote appeared to be having the desired effect so far, but would it be enough? Deanna's tale of Marlene responding to her in sleep was encouraging, but was it an indicator of Marlene's health or Deanna's as yet undeveloped powers? Certainly, Deanna did have a great deal of potential. Snape had every intention of keeping a very close watch on her, and not just because of the debt he owed to Caitlin. His interest in Deanna went beyond the purely personal. However, it was Melissa's daughter that concerned him now.

He studied her carefully. Certainly she was improving. However, she showed few signs of waking. And he had no idea how to improve the antidote. It was doing all it

could to empower Marlene's desire to live, and inhibit the death instincts. But would it be enough? Snape knew Melissa well enough to know that she would accept nothing less than Marlene's recovery. If she died... Snape did not want to think about Melissa's reaction. The thought of hearing all his secrets made public most emphatically did not appeal. And not just for his sake alone. There were other, innocent, victims who would suffer most dearly if all about his past was known. One face in particular kept crossing his mind. No, for her sake, if no one else's, he had to help Marlene. But how? It wasn't like he could enter her dream and help her fight from within, after all.

But Deanna had managed it, a little voice inside said. She could go in and help her. Especially if she had... assistance.

But that ritual is extremely complex. Hardly anyone's managed it! Snape thought. Granted, he could brew the necessary potions, but the spells required were beyond him. Only someone highly skilled at Charms could do it. Indeed, he only knew of two people who could accomplish such a feat, and one had been killed by Voldemort years ago. Which just left...

"Caitlin." he whispered. The thought of seeing his old schoolfriend again brought mixed feelings. On the one hand, his heart sang with joy at the thought of seeing her once more. On the other, his mind felt ill at the prospect. Given their past, how would Caitlin react to seeing him again? Especially given that he needed her to perform a risky and highly tricky ritual involving her only child. Nevertheless, there was no one else. Sighing, he got up and left. Time to send Corvus to her.

Caitlin patted her friend's arm sympathetically. She and Melissa were seated in Caitlin's front room, drinking herbal tea and talking. Well, Melissa was doing the talking, Caitlin was offering a sympathetic ear. Caitlin regarded Melissa with concern. Normally so calm, the DDAE Head was sitting hunched up on Caitlin's sofa, staring into space and crying. With her black velvet cloak draped over her shoulders and the smart Muggle business suit she usually wore underneath riding up around her neck, Melissa Lovegood looked more like a frightened child than the magical community's most feared Auror.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Caitlin!" Melissa wept. "Every time I think of Marlie lying there like that, I just feel so helpless! I mean, Dark Arts Defence is meant to be my speciality, isn't it? So why can't I stop something like this happening to my own daughter?"

Caitlin soothed her gently. "It's not your fault, Mel. She was at Hogwarts, she's not your responsibility while she's there. Everyone understands that."

"Do they now." Melissa said sceptically. "Try telling that to Marcus Vetinari. He's always been after my job, and now he's got proof I'm not up to it. Laetitia and Lucas are fine, aren't they? He didn't let them get poisoned!"

"Laetitia and Lucas have far fewer enemies and rather more personal power than Marlie." Caitlin interrupted. "Take it as a credit to her skill, if not her wits, that someone thought she was worth the trouble."

"Exactly!" Melissa snapped. "Why didn't she realise that and take precautions? Has she learnt nothing?"

"Mel, she's eleven." Caitlin said gently. "She's not had any of the experiences or training you've had. How was she to know? She thought she was safe at Hogwarts. Go easy on her, she's just a kid."

"Safe at Hogwarts." Melissa said grimly. "That's what they always say. You're perfectly safe when Albus Dumbledore's around." She looked wildly at Caitlin. "How did he let this happen? How did Severus let this happen? If she dies, I will never forgive either of them." She looked furious. Caitlin shifted uncomfortably. To this day, she still felt uncomfortable at the mention of Snape's name. Their past was still too tangibly real for her liking. At least she didn't have to actually see him at all.

Their attention was distracted by a scratching at the window. A large raven was sitting there with a letter attached to it.

"Caitlin." Melissa said casually. "You've got a letter." Caitlin felt her mouth go dry. Very few people used crows and ravens as familiars, and she personally knew only one person who did. Snape. Trembling, she got up and opened the window. The bird flew in, dropped the letter, and settled itself on Caitlin's shoulder, cawing gently in her ear.

Melissa regarded the letter, an odd gleam in her eyes. "Well, Caitlin. Aren't we the popular one? Going to open it? See what your ex has to say for himself?" She sneered the last sentence. Caitlin felt herself go red.

"He is not my ex!" she snapped, ripping the envelope open. Melissa watched her read it. Caitlin went pale and sank into a chair. "Read that." she whispered. Melissa took the letter off her and read.

Dear Caitlin,

As I'm sure you are aware, Marlene Lovegood is currently in a coma in Hogwarts hospital wing as a result of having imbibed the Sleeping Death potion. You may also be aware that Melissa has instructed me to research a cure. As yet, I've not found anything guaranteed to work, although I have produced a few extra strength antidotes that appear to be slowly improving her condition. However, there is one thing I have come across that may be effective. I believe you are aware of the Dream Weaver Ritual?

Melissa looked up, startled. "Dream Weaver?" she gasped. "Is he serious? That's incredibly dangerous! Not to mention difficult to perform. And who is he suggesting take part in the ritual?"

"Read the rest of it." Caitlin said with difficulty. Melissa did so.

I need your assistance in two things. Firstly, as one highly skilled at Charm work and a very experienced Auror, I need you to help me perform the ritual itself. While more than capable of brewing the appropriate potions, the actual charm work is beyond even me. Thus the need for your help.

Secondly, however, I need you to consent to the ritual's performance. You are aware that the Dream Weaver Ritual involves someone entering the dreams of a person that they are emotionally close to. After much thought, I have concluded that the most suitable candidate is your daughter Deanna.

"Deanna?" Melissa gasped. "He's not serious! I thought Deanna and Marlene hated each other? And for a mere child to undertake Dream Weaver... And to ask that it be yours! Hasn't he done you enough harm without asking that?"

Caitlin had her head in her hands. "Finish it, Mel." she said softly.

I fully realise that you may well be reluctant to allow your onlychild's participation in such a complex and dangerous ritual, however I beg that you hear my reasons and consider my request. Deanna has already managed to spontaneously project herself partially into Marlene's dream state and communicate with her briefly. She clearly has the natural talent to accomplish this feat. Also, after analysing Marlene's utterances while in trance, and talking with Deanna myself, I have come to the conclusion that Marlene has taken Deanna as her guide. Deanna therefore will likely find it much easier to enter the dreaming than any other person would, and is likely to be more successful in rousing her.

I will of course take all proper precautions during the ritual, and ensure that we can retrieve Deanna should anything go wrong. I will also respect the wishes of both Deanna and you in this matter and will not go ahead with this undertaking should either of you not wish it. However, for Marlene Lovegood's sake, I hope you will consider it.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

*Best wishes,
Severus*

Melissa laid the letter down in shock. "Deanna made contact?" she whispered, tears threatening to come again. She turned to Caitlin. "Well? Are you going to do it?"

Caitlin shook her head. "I don't know, Melissa. I really don't. I mean..." Her eyes flashed with fury. "After all these years, to hear nothing from him, then he thinks he can just walk back into my life without so much as a by your leave and demand I risk my daughter's sanity just like that..!" She snapped her fingers. "Of all the arrogant, self-centred... Well he can think again. There is no way Deanna is going through something like that."

Melissa didn't respond. She just looked at Caitlin reproachfully. Caitlin looked back at her.

"What? Don't look at me like that. I'm not risking my daughter just so he can have the kudos of inventing a cure for Sleeping Death. I'm not." Caitlin said gruffly.

"So your pride and hurt feelings are more important than my daughter's life." Melissa said quietly. Caitlin caught the thinly veiled meaning all too clearly. "Come on, Caitlin!" Melissa said desperately. "You know what Severus is like! There are roaches out there with better interpersonal skills than him! Doesn't mean he doesn't care about you. Or Deanna, for that matter. His heart is in the right place. Anyway, remember his pride. He wouldn't be asking you if he thought there was another way, of that I am certain."

Caitlin wavered. Melissa did have a point. She read through the letter again. Snape's tone was civil and surprisingly humble. Pleading, almost. It didn't seem like he was doing it out of spite. And it wasn't as if it was just her and Deanna to think about. When you came right down to it, Marlie's life was at stake here. And if Deanna was capable of entering Marlene's dreams and helping her, then she couldn't really refuse.

"Damn you both, Mel!" she snapped. "You and Severus, you always knew exactly how to get round all my defences. All right, I'll do it. But if Severus expects any emotional warmth from me, he can think again. I'm doing this for your sake and Marlie's, Mel, and no one else's!"

Melissa smiled. It was always easy enough to talk Caitlin into something, if you knew how. And she had no doubts that for all her animosity towards Snape, Caitlin would manage to work with him well enough. After all, they'd been good friends once. And given the different circumstances now, she was sure they could be again. As Caitlin scribbled a reply for Corvus to take back to Hogwarts, Melissa sipped her herbal tea. Things were looking up.

The following day found Severus Snape frantically going through his wardrobe looking for a set of robes that would impress Caitlin. Her response had been non-committal, merely asking him to meet her that evening in the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade to discuss the matter. He wasn't at all sure what she had in mind, but consoled himself that she clearly wasn't going to turn him down flat or she would have done so by letter.

A shower, shave and general spruce-up later, and Snape was on his way. Hogsmeade was not far by broom, and although Snape was by no means an expert flier, the short journey to Hogsmeade was well within his capabilities. He entered the Three Broomsticks slightly out of breath, ordered a mineral water and looked for Caitlin.

She was there, sitting on her own in a quiet corner, a glass of wine in front of her. Snape felt his heart skip a beat as he laid eyes on her again. Twelve years since he'd seen her last, and the years had been kind to her. She was still as pretty as she'd ever been.

He took the seat opposite her. "It is good to see you again, Caitlin. You look well." he said, hoping his voice didn't betray his inner feelings.

"No thanks to you." Caitlin said shortly. "I've not forgotten our last meeting, if you have. Experiences like that leave their mark on a woman."

Snape's good mood evaporated in an instant. "And you think it didn't affect me?" he snapped. "I was never the same after that night, never. Believe me, I would have done anything to prevent it if I could. Caitlin, for what's it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Caitlin hissed. "You put me through hell, and that's all you have to say?" She sat back and ran her hands through her hair. Snape tried to ignore the pangs of guilt currently racking his conscience.

"I did save your life, Caitlin." he said softly.

"Yes, I suppose you did." she said bitterly. "I almost wished you'd let me die though. In some ways it would have been preferable." She took a drink from her goblet. "Anyway, it's in the past now. That's not what I'm here to talk about. This ritual. You're serious, then."

"Never more so." Snape said. "I can see no other way. No antidote potion can do any more than provide the space and the strength to give the victim a fighting chance. This is the most effective means of reviving her. I know it's a lot to ask of you, but it's the only way. Caitlin, please." He gave her a pleading look.

Caitlin looked thoughtful. "Deanna's safety is my prime concern here. There will be safeguards, won't there?"

Snape reached out and took Caitlin's hand in his own. "You have my word. I would never do anything to endanger your life or that of Deanna. I will do all in my power to protect her."

Caitlin nodded. "Very well. I believe you. I don't know why I should, all reason screams against it, but I believe you. Does Deanna know yet?"

"Not yet. I wanted your permission first."

"Most thoughtful of you. You must ask her. If she consents, then I will do it."

Snape squeezed her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Caitlin, thank you! I don't deserve this, but thank you!"

Caitlin regarded him coldly. "No. You don't. Let go of me." Snape dropped her hand immediately, his hurt feelings swiftly camouflaged behind a cool exterior. "Let's get one thing clear." Caitlin said, her every word laced with venom. "I'm not doing this out of any obligation or feeling for you. I'm doing this because Mel is my best friend and I don't want her to suffer. As a mother myself, I know what she's going through. And Marlie's a good kid. I'm doing this for their sake not yours. So don't get any ideas about renewing our friendship, because I'm not interested. As far as I am concerned, any regard I once had for you is dead. Do you hear me?"

"I understand you." Snape said quietly, feeling as if a part of him was dying along with Marlene.

"Good." Caitlin said. "This is a purely professional relationship and that's how things are staying." She gave him a stern look. Snape didn't dare respond. All the answers he could think of would have got him slapped for certain. In the end, he opted for the formal response.

"As you wish, Caitlin. As you wish." he murmured. He hadn't really expected any warmth from her, but to hear it spelt out so clearly crushed him. However, at least they were talking again. It was a start. And maybe, just maybe, Caitlin would mellow and forgive him. Caitlin might act tough, but deep down she was soft as lights and Snape knew it. With this in mind, he opted for a change in subject.

"How's Melissa?" he asked suddenly. As he had hoped, Caitlin dropped her coolness. Her features changed from impassive to saddened.

"As well as could be expected. I mean, she's bearing up well, but..." She shook her head. "This is hitting the Lovegoods really hard. It's taking its toll on them. I fear for Mel, I fear for her marriage. Len's spending virtually all his free time down in the workshop. He says he's working on this Walkmage invention for Marlie, but I don't wonder if it's also to avoid facing up to things." Caitlin sighed. "I hope Marlie pulls through, if only for their sake. Mel's always been so strong, but this could break her, it really could."

"She'll make it." Snape said quietly. "Marlene's like her mother in reverse. Soft on the outside, strong on the inside. She'll make it. I'll do all I can to help." He was surprised to find himself meaning every word.

Caitlin burst into tears at this. "That poor kid!" she sobbed. "She's only eleven, she doesn't deserve this! She's got her whole life ahead of her. She doesn't deserve to die. And her whole family, they're being torn apart by this. If she goes down, the whole family falls to bits. All because some ignorant bastard wants to get back at Mel for whatever she did to him or his family way back when." She buried her face in her hands, crying. Snape shifted uneasily. While it was a relief to see some emotion, he hated seeing Caitlin upset, always had done. Moving his chair so he was sitting next to her, he slipped his arm around her. To his surprise, she didn't push him away, but just leant her head against him and allowed herself to be comforted. After a while, she recovered herself.

"I'm sorry." she said, wiping her eyes. "It's just getting to me, you know. All the worry and the stress... She's not even my daughter, and see what it's doing to me."

Snape didn't reply, just offered her his black silk handkerchief. She accepted it gratefully and dabbed her eyes.

"Didn't last long, did it? Keeping things professional, what a joke. Look at me. You can tell I've been on the red wine again." Caitlin laughed ruefully. "You always did know how to get under my skin. You and Mel both."

"The feeling is mutual, my dear." Snape said with a trace of amusement in his voice. "I have routinely done things for you that I would never have considered doing for anyone else."

"Like what?" Caitlin asked lightly.

Snape gazed intensely into her eyes. "I would have left any other witch to her fate that night."

Caitlin's face lost all trace of lightheartedness. Now she looked only fearful.

"I have to go." she said thickly. She broke away from him and got to her feet.

"Caitlin, wait." Snape called after her in desperation and fury at himself. "Don't go."

But she wasn't listening. Backing away from him, she turned and made swiftly for the door. Snape, cursing himself under his breath, ran after her. Reaching the door, he looked for her, but in vain. She'd already Disapparated.

Chapter Fifteen: The Net Draws In

The atmosphere in the Serpent's Nest began to improve dramatically as Christmas approached. Summer Montague, Kat Stormosi and Laetitia Vetinari made good use of Decoration Charms in the common room, while Jordan Foxworth and Mike Lovegood mysteriously managed to acquire a tree from somewhere, although not even Jordan's brother Geoff could get them to admit how. However, Luella couldn't help noticing the Forbidden Forest looked just a little different the next day. Slightly... smaller.

The ground outside was covered in snow, and an informal inter-house snowball championship had grown into being. So far the Gryffindors were winning, although Deanna had managed to regain some popularity by some spectacularly dirty fighting. It had also had the unexpected side-effect of impressing Crabbe, who disliked Gryffindor House even more than most Slytherins.

"He trusts me!" Deanna was able to tell Luella and Rianne with pride. "He keeps saying how impressed he is with me. Not to mention dropping hints on how I could get back at all those who've abandoned me for sticking to my guns. I think, with a little work at it, I can get a confession out of him pretty soon. Is that tape recorder done yet?"

"Pretty much." Rianne said gleefully. "Got an owl from Mr. Lovegood the other day. Practically ready. He says we should have it on Christmas morning, he's going to send it with Mike's presents." Mike Lovegood had already made it generally known that he would be staying at Hogwarts over the holidays. Nothing had been said, but everyone guessed that he couldn't face Christmas at home without his sister.

"So maybe we can do it over the holidays." Luella said thoughtfully. "There won't be so many people around and Crabbe might be in a party mood. He might be more willing to talk." Crabbe and his little gang were also staying over during the holidays. Luella suspected that this was more out of a desire to taunt Mike about his sister than sampling Hogwarts Christmas dinner.

"OK." Deanna said firmly. "That settles it. I'll stay over so we can go for it over the holidays. Hopefully, by January they'll be expelled, I'll be a hero, and I can get my self-respect back."

"I'll join you. You'll need me to help set the thing up." Rianne said decisively.

"And me. I'm not spending Christmas without you." Luella added.

Deanna grinned. "You two are the best, you know that? Come here. Group hug." She grabbed the two of them and they all three hugged each other. Suddenly, although the most risky and dangerous part of their plan was yet to come, Luella felt hopeful.

Finally, term ended. The Slytherin Party was more subdued than normal, with the traditional "absent friends" toast especially poignant this year. However, it was still pretty raucous, and went on well into the night. It was a very tired and drained looking Slytherin House that boarded the Hogwarts Express next morning.

Deanna turned away from the departing carriages with a sigh. The holidays were really upon them, and that meant she now faced the real prospect of having to trap Crabbe soon. However, she consoled herself with the fact that the next time she saw the carriages, Crabbe would be expelled, and it would be down to her. With the vision of all the Slytherins cheering her and a sobbing Mike Lovegood thanking her for avenging his sister and begging forgiveness for ever doubting her on her mind, she headed back for the Slytherin Corridor and almost walked into Professor Snape.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Sorry, sir. Didn't see you. Are you alright?"

"Watch where you are going in future, Miss Tyler. Foresight is an important quality and one you would do well to cultivate. Come with me, I wish to speak with you in my office. Now." Snape had a cold, tight-lipped expression on his face, so Deanna decided it was best not to argue.

Deanna followed him into his office and did a double-take. Sitting behind Snape's desk was none other than Professor Dumbledore himself. Deanna had had very little experience of her Headmaster so far, and suddenly being asked to attend an interview with both him and Professor Snape could only mean one thing. She was in trouble. She glanced around the office. Someone else, a woman, was seated in one of the three chairs.

"Mum!" Deanna gasped. Caitlin smiled thinly. "Hello, dear." she said, a small quiver in her voice betraying fear. However, she did not seem angry. In fact, Caitlin Tyler seemed, if anything, fearful and sad.

Deanna took the seat next to her mother, and was vaguely aware of Snape seating himself on her left. "Mum, what's going on? Are you OK? I'm not in trouble, am I?" Deanna trembled. Her house head, headmaster, and mother in such a formal setting was not a good sign.

Professor Dumbledore seemed to relax at this point, although Snape still maintained an icy cold exterior and Caitlin looked terrified.

"No, Deanna, you are not in trouble. Quite the reverse in fact." His eyes twinkled behind the voluminous beard. "We require your assistance in a most important matter."

"Me? Help you?" Deanna asked, surprised. "Why do you need me?"

"It's your friend, Miss Lovegood. I won't bother with any of the details of her case as you doubtless already know all about that. Indeed, I daresay you know more than I do." He regarded her amusedly. Deanna smiled nervously and shifted in her seat.

What was Professor Dumbledore getting at?

"Well," Dumbledore continued, "Sleeping Death's effects are such that conventional antidotes are not guaranteed to work, and even specially designed ones can do no more than give the victim a chance to fight. So we are considering resorting to a ritual known as Dream Weaver. Have you heard of it?"

"Dream Weaver?" Deanna thought hard. The name sounded familiar. Somewhere in one of her mother's Auror manuals... "Isn't that where someone enters another person's dreams to help them work with them?"

"Well done." Dumbledore sounded impressed. "Your mother has taught you well." Caitlin acknowledged the compliment without a word. Dumbledore continued. "Yes, that is the basic premise of Dream Weaver. A ritual beloved of both healers and Dark Mages the world over. And it is this ritual we are proposing to carry out on Miss Lovegood."

"I see." Deanna said in a small voice. "But what does that have to do with me?" She was uncomfortably aware of the tension in the room. On one side of her, Caitlin was wringing her hands, on the other Snape seemed to have frozen. Dumbledore's humour vanished.

"We were hoping you could enter her dreams for us." Dumbledore said softly.

Deanna felt herself go numb. Her, Deanna Tyler, eleven year old first year Hogwarts witch? Take part in Dream Weaver, one of the more complex and dangerous ritual around?

"You're not serious." she whispered.

"Professor Snape tells me you've already done it once. With the help of Dream Weaver, we were hoping you'd be able to do it more completely and give Miss Lovegood the help she needs to break free." Dumbledore gazed keenly at her.

"But isn't Dream Weaver dangerous?" Deanna said fearfully.

"There are risks involved." Dumbledore said cautiously. "However, there will be safeguards in place so that we can return you to your body at the first sign of trouble. And the ritual is to be performed by two very capable mages who both have your best interests at heart."

"Who...?" Deanna started to ask, then realised. They were sitting either side of her.

"Your mother and I will be conducting it." Snape said stonily, his voice sounding far away, as if his mind was elsewhere entirely. "All appropriate safeguards will be used. The danger will be minimal."

Caitlin squeezed her daughter's shoulder, her eyes shining very brightly. "We'll do all we can to keep you safe, love." she said gently, her voice trembling a little. "I won't

let any harm come to you, I promise."

Deanna's fear abated a little. With her mother watching out for her, she would surely be safe, wouldn't she? And Snape could be relied on to keep calm in a crisis. Plus Dumbledore himself was likely to be around. And it was Marlie's best chance at recovery.

"Alright," she heard herself saying. "I'll do it." Even while another voice shouted Fool! Are you mad?

The three adults all seemed to relax a little. "Thank you, Deanna," Dumbledore said, sounding greatly relieved. "Severus, when is the ritual to take place?"

"The necessary potions will take me a month to prepare, so I believe we can perform it towards the end of January. I recommend Candlemas Eve as the best date," Snape replied.

"Excellent. Well, in that case, I'll leave all three of you to start preparing." Dumbledore left and with that, the meeting dispersed. Snape began busying himself with some potions ingredients, strangely unwilling to approach Caitlin, who led her daughter out into the corridor.

They didn't speak for some time. It was Caitlin who broke the silence.

"Deanna..." she began, "Deanna, are you sure you want to go through with this? Because I won't mind if you want to back out. That is... if you think it's too dangerous, I won't think any the worse of you."

Deanna touched her mother's hand. "Mum, don't worry. I want to do all I can to help Marlie, and if that means going into her dreams, then OK. No I'm not sure about it, of course I'm not, it sounds terrifying. But I still want to do it."

Caitlin hugged her daughter, tears filling her eyes. "Oh, Deanna! I love you, you know that? You're such a wonderful daughter. I just wanted you to know."

Deanna felt faintly embarrassed at this sudden display of emotion. "Mum, please," she said, hoping against hope that no one she knew saw her.

Caitlin dried her eyes and released Deanna. "Sorry, dear. But I just wanted you to know that, just in case..." She left the words unspoken.

"It's OK. I'll be fine. Marlie's mind can't be too bad a place, can it? She's had a very cushy life, it's not like I'm exploring Auntie Mel's mind or anything." Although Deanna didn't know the details of her godmother's past, she guessed that having been an Auror during the Voldemort Years couldn't have been a walk in the park. Unless it was Central Park in the middle of the night, that is.

Caitlin smiled nervously. "Yes... yes, you're right. You'll be fine. Now it must surely be lunchtime soon, why don't you take me to the Great Hall, see if Hogwarts cuisine

is as good as it used to be in my day?"

The days passed swiftly and it was no time at all until Christmas morning dawned in Hogwarts. In the Slytherin girls' first year dorm, Luella was first to wake. For a while, she did nothing, just lay there savouring the early morning quiet. The fact that it was Christmas morning did not immediately occur to her. At least, not until she heard an excited squeal from across the room. Minutes later, her bed hangings were flung open and she found herself greeted by a flushed Rianne, still in her pyjamas.

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine, Lu! It's Christmas!" she yelled. Luella blinked. Across the foot of her bed was a pile of parcels of various shapes and sizes.

Before she could react, Deanna, bleary-eyed and hair all over the place, poked her head out of her own curtains.

"What on earth is going on out here?" she said sleepily before noticing all the parcels at the foot of her own bed. "Ooh, presents!" she exclaimed, suddenly becoming more energised.

"Wake up, sleepy head!" Rianne called cheerfully, sending a Wind Charm her way and causing Deanna to shriek as the wind whipped her hair into even more of a tangle. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and poked her tongue out at Rianne, who ignored her.

"Come on you two, let's see some liveliness! It's Christmas! How can you be content to sleep? I've been up since five, but refrained from checking out any of my presents out of consideration for you."

"Very kind of you, Ri." Deanna yawned. "What time is it now, ten past?"

Rianne threw a pillow at her. "Idiot. Half seven. Come on. Presents. We'll take it in turns. You first, Lu."

Luella reached for the nearest present. It turned out to be from Mrs. Tyler, who'd sent her a blue velvet winter cloak.

"Nice." Deanna said, eyeing it up. "You'll need it, if what I've heard about Hogwarts winters is true. Obviously Mum doesn't want to see you freeze to death."

Luella's other presents turned out to be a necklace and a copy of Madonna's "Like A Prayer" album from her parents, with which Deanna was most impressed, a copy of Hogwarts: A History from Rianne ("well, I thought you'd be interested in the background seeing as you don't have mage parents to tell you things."), and from Deanna, a dark blue Dicta-Quill, which wrote things for you as you dictated to it. Luella, a left-hander, had had numerous problems learning to deal with quill pens and ink bottles, so Deanna, out of pity and sympathy (despite having learnt to write with quills from an early age, as a left-hander herself, she too still had problems) had

decided to get her a present which would make her life that bit easier.

Deanna was next. From her mother, an aromatherapy kit with essential oils. ("Erm, my mum's a bit of an old hippie." Deanna said, faintly embarrassed, but Luella could tell that she was secretly rather pleased with it.) From Rianne, a magical hairdryer, herbal shampoo and conditioner, and styling tongs. Deanna's biggest irritation was her hair which flatly refused to do anything other than hang there loosely and get greasy annoyingly quickly. Half her life and pocket money had been spent on things that would make it look good but it was still a battle. From Luella's parents, a Selection Box of Chocolates. ("Muggle, but very nice!" Deanna said with approval.) From Mrs. Lovegood, a book entitled *Dark Mages Through The Ages* all about how various dark wizards and witches got their come-uppance, which Deanna was most enthusiastic about, and from Luella, a guitar maintenance kit complete with tuition book and tape. Deanna's prized possession was her acoustic guitar, and her energies were going into learning how to play it. Luella thought Deanna was rather good, although she was surprisingly shy about anyone hearing her play.

Then it was Rianne's turn. Compared to theirs, Rianne's present pile was huge. It seemed she had rather a lot of relations, all of whom seemed to be Italian fashion designers judging from the amount of designer robes she appeared to have. However, she eventually exhausted her present pile. There was now only one present left to unwrap.

"Well, Ri?" Deanna asked. "You going to open it?"

"Who's it from?" Luella asked.

"Mr. Lovegood." Rianne said quietly. There was a letter attached and she read it out loud to them first.

Dear Rianne,

Well, here it is. The finished product, that you've been waiting for so long to get your hands on. The Walkmage. I've no idea how it will function in Hogwarts, but I've tested it in a contained magical field here and it seems to work. It's powered by quartz crystal batteries which absorb magical energy from the environment. There should be no problems at Hogwarts; the same magic that wreaks havoc with conventional technology will be more than adequate to powering this. All you need to do is leave it for 24 hours to charge up then it should be ready. It really is a wonderful invention, I'm very impressed with Marlie. I just hope that it can wake her up, we all really miss her here. I've enclosed some of her favourite tapes so you can play them to her, and some blank ones so you can record onto it as requested.

Anyway, good luck with it. Hope it goes well for you all and it works out. Hopefully we'll be seeing you in the summer as usual.

Merry Christmas,

Leonard Lovegood.

Rianne laid down the letter. "Wow." she whispered. "It's here. And it actually works!"

"So let's have a look at it then!" Deanna said impatiently. Rianne tore off the wrapping paper. It was packed inside a cardboard box along with lots of bubble wrap which Deanna immediately pounced on and started popping, and some tapes by Madonna, the Bangles, Bananarama, and a band by the name of Incubus Succubus who Rianne claimed were an up and coming mage rock band and were really rather good.

Rianne brushed them to one side and reached for the Walkmage itself. Peeling the bubble wrap away, she held it out for inspection. Luella and Deanna gasped. It looked little different from an ordinary Walkman, but it was clear that it had been taken apart and welded together again. There were headphones, speakers, and a microphone with it, which seemed to have had the wires removed and replaced with some magical substance unknown to Luella.

"Unicorn hair wrapped in basilisk skin and protected with Indestructible Charms." Deanna breathed. "Nice! Kind of like mini-wands. Capable of channelling magical energy. When can we use it?"

"Tomorrow, it says here." Rianne said, indicating the letter. Luella looked at for herself. The date at the top caught her eye. 20th December 1989. Which meant...

"Ri, the letter was sent days ago! It's probably been at Hogwarts since the 22nd at least! Which means..." she paused, letting them work it out.

"It's fully charged and we can use it now!" Deanna exclaimed. "Excellent! Let's try it out."

The first thing to get played was Luella's new Madonna album. Rianne was most impressed by it. "Well, if this is Muggle music, I like it! Madonna is ace."

"Too right she is." Deanna lay back, tapping her feet to Express Yourself. "Tell you what, we should go to see her some time. All four of us. I think it'd be fun. Going to a Muggle gig."

"It'd be an experience." Luella smiled. "I'd love to! And I bet Marlie would be up for it."

"That settles it then. She's got to wake up for that. Who wouldn't want to miss Madonna live?" Deanna said, as if it were decided.

Rianne however seemed preoccupied. "All very well going on about what we're going to do when Marlie's better. But we need to remember why we got this thing in the first place. We need to fix it up to you, Deanna, and see if it records properly when concealed. Come on, let's try it with a blank tape."

Much testing and arrangements of Walkmage, microphone and Spellotape later, and Deanna was finally wired up to it. Mr. Lovegood had thoughtfully added a remote

control feature, so it could be controlled by tapping one's wand. This made it much easier for Deanna to turn on and off when necessary.

Luella stood back, surveying their handiwork. "Well, you're as ready as you'll ever be. Down to you now, 007. Reckon you can get him to confess soon?"

"No probs. Crabbe's been hinting about some triumph of his for ages now. I think he's ready to tell me." Deanna's usual cockiness was back. "Come on. I'm hungry. It must be nearly time for dinner."

The rest of the day passed less happily. They spent most of the day in the common room. Luella and Rianne passed the time playing Exploding Snap, while Deanna sat apart from them, reading the book Mrs. Lovegood had sent her. She had eaten her meals with Crabbe, listening to him, Goyle, and Clarissa making pointed comments about Mike and why he wasn't at home this year. Deanna forced herself to smile and join in, although privately her heart bled for him.

The three older Slytherins approached her that evening as she was reading.

"What's that you got there, Tyler?" Crabbe asked her.

"Book from Melissa Lovegood. She's my godmother. Has hopes of me becoming an Auror like her. Fat chance." She snorted. "I mean, I might just to learn all the cool magic they know, but fancy having all that power and not getting to use it."

"A woman after my own heart." Clarissa laughed softly. "Power's no good unless you use it, isn't it Dexter?" The three of them laughed harshly. Deanna forced a grin.

"Melissa Lovegood's a weakling and a fool. Much like her daughter." Crabbe was grinning. Deanna surreptitiously tapped her wand against her chair. The tape recorder began whirring. No one else seemed to notice.

"So, I suppose you're pretty happy Marlene's out for the count then. I must say, it was pretty silly of her to get herself poisoned like that. Didn't check her food and drink carefully enough. Silly cow." Deanna dismissed Marlie with a wave of her hand.

Crabbe leaned a little closer to her. "You wouldn't have let that happen to you, would you?"

"Course not." Deanna replied contemptuously, her pulse racing. "As if I'd be so naive. She's too trusting. Too... nice. You can't afford to be nice in this world. You've got to be smart. Cunning. Devious. Live by your wits, look out for number one. Trust no one."

The others were giving each other appreciative glances. "Do you really believe that?" Crabbe asked her. Deanna nodded. He leaned closer.

"What if we were to show you a way of protecting yourself? Making your way that

bit easier?" He seemed almost hungry.

"Easier how?" Deanna purred softly.

He drew even closer to her. Deanna fought the urge to back away. Goyle and Clarissa moved around to block out the rest of the common room.

"There's all sorts of power in this world. There's the stuff they teach here. And then there's... other things. We're learning the other things. And we'd be willing to teach them to you." There was a ravenous gleam in his eyes. Deanna felt a rush of adrenaline. She lowered her voice.

"Do you mean Dark Arts?" she whispered, trying to sound impressed.

"We prefer to call it Hidden Magic. The magic they don't want you to know about. And why don't they want you to know about it? Because if you did, you'd be truly powerful. There'd be no one who could stop you. And certain people in authority find that threatening. You know why?" Deanna shook her head.

"Because they're weak. They feel threatened by strength. They fear it might destroy them, as well it might. But why should we strong ones let concern for them stand in our way of realising our potential? If you let others control your destiny, look where you end up. In a hospital bed in a coma, like that fool Lovegood. Power, Deanna. That's all that really matters."

"What could I do with this power?" Deanna asked, seemingly enthralled.

"Anything you like." Crabbe grinned mysteriously. "Bring those in authority round to your way of thinking. Make whoever you want fall in love with you. Get rid of any enemy. All yours, if you really want it."

"I could send that self-righteous snob Rianne Stormosi and my erstwhile Mudblood friend the same way as Lovegood." Deanna mused.

"Very good." Crabbe grinned. "I could show you how. It's not so hard. Sleeping Death is an amazing tool if you want to frighten others. Or remove someone from your path if they happen to have something you want."

"Like a place on the Quidditch first team?" Deanna grinned.

"You learn fast, Tyler." Crabbe said appreciatively. "I got rid of Lovegood for you. I could teach you how to have the other two at your mercy."

Deanna felt her eyes widen. She had him! Crabbe patted her cheek. "I knew you'd see things our way. Come and join us. We'll teach you a few basic things." With that, he led her away to a quiet corner, where the rest of the evening was spent teaching Deanna a few more dangerous hexes.

Deanna finally excused herself around half past ten, claiming tiredness. She sneaked back to her dorm, and locked the door behind her. Luella and Rianne were waiting as Deanna extricated the Walkmage.

"Well?" Luella asked, trembling in anticipation. "Did you get anything?"

Deanna beamed. "He walked right into it. We, my dears, have got him. Right where we want him." She played the tape to them. They listened open-mouthed as Crabbe's voice was heard saying "You learn fast, Tyler. I got rid of Lovegood for you. I could teach you how to have the other two at your mercy."

"Deanna, that's brilliant." Rianne said softly.

"He confessed!" Luella said in a daze. "He actually confessed! We've really and truly got him!"

"We really and truly have!" Deanna grinned. All three of them hugged each other.

"We just need to get that tape to Professor Snape in the morning now." Rianne said. "Lu and me had better do that, we don't want to blow your cover just yet."

"I'll look after the tape if you like." Luella volunteered. And with that, the tape was stored in Luella's bedside cabinet.

Immediately on waking, Luella and Rianne grabbed the tape and Walkmage, got dressed and raced to Snape's office. Snape, still in his nightclothes and unshaven, was less than pleased to see them.

"What exactly is so important that you feel the need to wake me up at this untimely hour in the morning?" he said irritably. "What time is it anyway?"

"Eight o'clock." Rianne said promptly. "But that's not important. Sir, we've got something for you!"

"Your Christmas spirit touches my soul." Snape said dryly. "However, you appear to have overlooked the fact that Christmas was yesterday."

Rianne shook her head. "Not a Christmas present. Sir, we've done it. We've got proof who poisoned Marlie."

This seemed to wake Snape up. "Indeed?" He raised an eyebrow. "You had better come in. Take a seat while I get dressed in the other room."

Luella and Rianne sat down in his office while Snape moved away into his private apartments. Ten minutes later he returned, fully dressed, shaved and looking rather more alert.

"So." he said. "What have you got for me?"

Luella produced the Walkmage from her bag. "This." she said, attaching the speakers and inserting the tape. Snape looked at it in bewilderment and scepticism.

"And this is meant to be what exactly?"

"It's a Walkmage." Luella explained patiently, rather pleased at knowing something that Snape didn't. "It's a Muggle invention adapted for use at Hogwarts. Marlie designed it, her dad built it. You can use it to record sound and play it back later. Music. Background noise. Conversations."

Rianne took up the thread. "We used it to get a taped confession out of Crabbe. Or rather, Deanna did. She's an excellent spy, very convincing. Anyway, listen to this." She played the tape. Snape listened intently.

After it had finished, Snape sat back in amazement. "Well, well, well. I am very impressed. I knew you were planning something, but I would never have guessed... Whose idea was all this?"

"Deanna's." Luella and Rianne chorused. Snape chuckled to himself.

"Should have known. So that's what she was up to. Her mother will be pleased. Not to mention her godmother. She'll make an excellent Auror one of these days. Twenty points each for all three of you for showing initiative." Snape said, with more than a hint of pride. He then returned to his usual brusque manner. "I need to speak with Professor Dumbledore about this. I'll need to borrow this...?"

"Walkmage." Rianne said. "Take it. Just as long as we get it back afterwards."

"Of course. Very well, I will speak with Professor Dumbledore after breakfast. Then if all goes well, arrange an interview with Crabbe and his friends this afternoon. I will have to expel them of course. With any luck, they will be on the Hogwarts Express by this evening and Miss Tyler can resume a normal life again. Now, I believe they will be serving breakfast soon, so why don't you two leave this with me? I shall see you both soon, no doubt." He ushered them out. Luella and Rianne left with a spring in their step.

"We did it!" Luella whispered with joy as they emerged into the Slytherin Corridor. "We really did it! We caught them, and they're expelled!"

Rianne hugged her. "Lu, we're wonderful, aren't we? Professor Snape thought so too, didn't he? Look how impressed he was with the Walkmage! And sixty points for Slytherin! I'm so happy!"

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Easily pleased, aren't you? Ri, for someone who claims not to have a crush on Snape, you're not doing a very convincing job."

Rianne flushed with embarrassment. "I do not have a crush on Professor Snape! I

respect him as my House Master and a very skilled Potions teacher, and that is all!"

"Of course it is, Ri." Luella said teasingly. "And you were respecting him like mad when you got a chance to see him in his nightwear, weren't you?"

"Luella!" Rianne gasped in shock. "As if I'd do anything of the sort! Although he did look so much different when he'd just been woken up. More... innocent. And vulnerable. Like he hadn't had time to put on that irascible old curmudgeon front he usually wears."

Luella shook her head in amused disbelief. "Whatever you say, Ri. Whatever you say. What's it worth for me not to tell Deanna you said that?"

"Luella Martin, if you breathe one word of that to anyone, I'll..." Rianne threatened.

Luella grinned. "Make me." And with that, she was off, with a furious Rianne chasing after her, threatening all sorts of dire punishments if Luella so much as opened her mouth in future.

Snape was as good as his word. Later that day, he came into the common room, called Crabbe, Goyle, and Clarissa out and left. An hour later, the three of them returned. They did not look happy. Crabbe marched straight over to Deanna.

"You little bitch!" he snarled at her. "We took you into our confidence and you betrayed us! You'll pay for this, Tyler. I swear it, you'll pay."

Deanna appeared unruffled. "I kept telling you, trust no one. You would have done well to take that advice, Dexter."

"We're expelled, thanks to you!" Clarissa cried. "Glittering careers ahead of us, and now it's all in ruins."

"Yeah, our parents are going to kill us." Goyle grunted. "We're not happy, Tyler."

"Not happy at all." Crabbe said softly. "And do you know what we do to people we're not happy with?"

Deanna never did find out what this was, as the conversation was cut short by the common room door opening. Professor Snape stepped in nonchalantly, wand in hand.

"I believe I told the three of you to pack your things and leave?" he said idly. "Your carriage will be here soon, I don't want it kept waiting. Leave Miss Tyler alone."

Crabbe, Goyle and Clarissa didn't dare reply. They went to their separate dorms, casting dark looks at Deanna. Snape watched them leave without a word. Mike Lovegood broke the silence.

"Sir?" he began.

"Yes, Lovegood?" Snape asked, not unkindly.

"Sir, where are they going?"

"Home."

"Why?" Mike asked, bewildered.

"They're expelled. Brewing Sleeping Death without a permit is illegal after all. They are lucky they're not in Azkaban. Although that may change when I notify your mother."

"Sleeping Death? You mean...?" Mike's jaw dropped in amazement.

"That's right. They poisoned your sister. Apparently, Crabbe was jealous that she stole the place on the Quidditch team that he'd thought would be his. Obvious really, but very difficult to prove." Snape seemed to be enjoying himself.

"How? How did you find out?" Mike whispered, still in shock.

"Well, it was really thanks to Misses Martin, Stormosi and Tyler here. Your sister is fortunate indeed in her choice of friends. You will have to get the details off them. Which reminds me. Miss Martin, your Walkmage." He handed the tape recorder to Luella. Crabbe, Goyle and Clarissa re-emerged with their trunks. Snape wasted no time in ushering them out. As he followed them, he gave the three girls a half-smile of congratulatory pride.

Mike gazed at them in awe. "It was you three who found out? But how? And why have you got a Walkman, you know they don't work here."

"A Walkmage, Lovegood." Deanna corrected, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. "Specially adapted for Hogwarts use. Designed by your sister, built by your dad. We put it into use and recorded Crabbe confessing everything. I spent weeks ingratiating myself with his little gang so he'd trust me enough to brag about it. My finest hour." Deanna was bursting with pride.

Mike was stunned. "You mean you weren't really friends with them at all?" Deanna shook her head. "You were just pretending?" Deanna nodded, her grin widening. "You were spying on them?" Deanna nodded again, looking as if she was about to burst.

"You really went to all that trouble just to get them punished? All for Marlie's sake?" He looked unable to comprehend it. He gazed at Deanna, an unfathomable look in his eyes.

"I think I owe you an apology." he said softly. "Deanna Tyler, I take back everything I ever said about you. For sheer deviousness, if nothing else, you are a more than worthy Slytherin. I'm really sorry I shouted at you like that. Can you ever forgive

me?"

Deanna grinned. "Go on then. Wasn't really your fault, I was a real bitch. Can't say I blame you. I've have done the same, you know. Shake on it?"

Mike grinned and they shook hands. And with that, the pall of gloom that had been over the Serpent's Nest for so long lifted a little.

The start of term led to a similar reconciliation with the Slytherin boys, all of whom professed awe for Deanna and sorrow that they'd ever doubted her. Lucas Vetinari apologised profusely to her for ostracising her, and made it up to her by shouting her triumph to the entire common room, while Chris Bryant seemed very impressed with the Walkmage, especially now he was able to give that Def Leppard demonstration he'd failed at before. It didn't impress everyone, but it did lead to a great many Slytherins owling home to get their own music collections sent to Hogwarts, and quite a few requests to have their own made up. It also led to a great many fights over what music to listen to, and many threats by Debra Stormosi and Professor Snape to confiscate it, which luckily were not carried out. All in all, life in the Serpent's Nest began to resemble nothing more than one continuous party. However, although Marlie had been avenged, as Rianne pointed out, she was still firmly asleep.

"We may have caught Crabbe, but Marlie's not better yet." Rianne said pragmatically. "She's still in the hospital wing, and she's no closer to waking. And I have no idea how we're going to accomplish that. All very well everyone here celebrating, but it'll be a bittersweet victory indeed if Marlie goes and dies on us."

Deanna felt a chill go up her spine. She remembered her promise to Dumbledore about entering Marlie's dreams. The other side of Christmas and with the capture of Crabbe to occupy her mind, she'd had little time to think about what she'd committed to. Now, however, she couldn't stop. Candlemas Eve, February 1st, was only a few weeks away and seemed to be advancing ever closer with disturbing speed. How on earth was getting into Marlie's dreams going to help her? What if there was nothing she could do? What if it all went horribly wrong? The possibilities for one or both of them dying seemed endless. Perhaps worst of all, she'd need to put her trust in Professor Snape, who she still didn't entirely feel comfortable around. However, there was nothing she could do now. For better or for worse, Dream Weaver awaited.

Chapter Sixteen: Dream Weaver

It was three weeks into the new term when Deanna got the news she had been dreading. On the morning of Candlemas Eve, at the end of Defence Against the Dark Arts, their first lesson, Snape entered, causing Professor Quirrell to leap about a foot into the air and tremble in terror.

"I need to have a quick word with Miss Tyler, Samael." he said casually to Quirrell who desperately tried to smile.

"O-of course, S-s-s-Severus. Miss T-tyler?"

Deanna approached them as the rest of the class filed out, her insides numb with fear. Quirrell hung around nervously, waiting for Snape to say what he needed to.

"Alone." Snape snapped at him, giving him a look of death. Quirrell squeaked and ran out with unseemly haste.

"Sir?" she asked nervously, hoping he wasn't going to say what she thought he was.

Snape was regarding her with a strange, unfathomable look. His voice sounded distant.

"Miss Tyler, you recall our conversation before Christmas?" Deanna couldn't be certain, but Snape seemed to be avoiding her eyes.

"Yes sir." she said quietly.

"The preparations are complete. The ritual is ready. Your mother will be arriving this evening to perform it. Are you still willing to participate?"

There was no doubt about it. He was definitely avoiding her eyes.

"I'm willing." she said shortly.

"Good, good." There was a pause. Snape fidgeted slightly. Neither knew quite what to say to each other. Snape broke the silence.

"The ritual will take place at eight o'clock tonight. Be in my office at half past seven. Your mother and I will be waiting for you. You may go now." With that he dismissed her brusquely. Feeling strangely hurt by his coldness, Deanna left.

The next few hours passed in a blur. Rianne talked quite normally, unaware of Deanna's fears. Luella however did notice that Deanna was far from her usual talkative self.

"You alright, Dee?" Luella asked with concern. "You've hardly touched that chocolate cake."

"I'm fine. Not hungry." Deanna forced a smile. Well, that much was true at least. She felt too queasy to possibly eat anything.

"Well give it here, then." Rianne said, oblivious to Deanna's discomfort. "No sense letting good food go to waste." Deanna let her take her dessert away and start scoffing it.

Luella was not so easily fooled. "Not like you to let chocolate cake go begging. Are you sure you're OK? You've been acting weird ever since term started, like you're worried about something. What's up?"

Deanna deliberated over what to say. On the one hand, she was desperate to confide in Luella. On the other, she didn't want her worrying as well.

"I'm fine. Really. Don't worry." Deanna smiled. Luella did not look convinced but chose not to pursue the subject any further.

However, when Deanna left the common room later, saying she was going to ask Snape for help with her Potions homework, Luella, her suspicions already aroused, followed her out and cornered her.

"Alright, Deanna. Out with it. Where are you really going?"

"I told you. I'm going to ask Snape about our Potions assignment." Deanna said roughly.

"Yeah, right. And Marlie's a thrash metal fan. Since when have you ever actually asked anyone for help? And Snape of all people! If you're going to lie, make it plausible." Luella's sharp tongue hid genuine concern and hurt that Deanna wasn't confiding in her.

Deanna shifted uncomfortably. Luella was giving her the same reproachful look her mother always gave her when she wasn't being 100% honest. Her conscience eventually won out, and she told her.

"Alright. I've managed to let myself get talked into taking part in this ritual to try and wake Marlie up. And that's where I'm going. Snape and Mum are conducting it."

Luella gasped in astonishment. "What sort of ritual? Is it dangerous? And why didn't you tell me earlier?" She wore an expression of concern mingled with irritation.

Deanna shuffled her feet and looked at the ground. "Didn't want you to worry." she muttered.

"Worry? Deanna, what exactly are they getting you to do?" Luella now looked terrified.

"They're getting me to enter her dreams and try and help her somehow. Snape reckons it's the only way."

Luella slipped her arm round her friend's shoulder in silence. Deanna, free of the need for secrecy now, felt all the pent-up fear of the last few weeks spill over.

"I don't want to do it, Lu." she whispered, shaking. "I'm scared. So many possibilities of things going wrong... You should have seen Mum when they asked me, she looked so frightened. Afterwards, she actually told me what a wonderful daughter I was and how much she loved me, just in case something happened. She almost never does that when she's sober, she hates all that mushy stuff as much as I do. I'm so scared I'll get trapped in there and end up as some kind of vegetable, or Marlie dies with me still in there. So afraid..."

"Hey. It'll be OK, Dee." Luella said gently. "It'll be fine. Snape and Mrs. Tyler, they know their stuff. You'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say!" Deanna snapped. "You don't have to do it! I'm the one taking the risk here! I don't think I can go through with it, Lu, I really don't!" She held her head in her hands, close to tears. Luella shook her firmly.

"Listen to me, Deanna. Come on, look at me." Deanna obediently raised her head and looked into Luella's eyes. Luella continued firmly.

"Listen to me, Deanna Tyler. You can do it and you will. You're brave. You care about Marlie and you're willing to take the risk. You will conquer your fear and you'll go through with it. And you'll succeed. Because you have power. Snape and Mrs. Tyler wouldn't be asking you if they didn't think you could do it. You will do it, Deanna. You hear me?"

Deanna seemed to have gone into some kind of trance, for she just stared fixedly at Luella for a bit. Luella began to worry. Was Deanna alright? However, her fears were allayed when Deanna shook herself and seemed to snap out of it.

"Did you say something, Lu?" Deanna asked, sounding much like her old self and not afraid at all.

"I was telling you not to be afraid about the ritual, you'll be perfectly safe. Deanna, are you OK? You looked like you were in some kind of trance there."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Deanna said dismissively. Then she realised. She really did feel fine. No trace of fear at all. Instead this feeling of utter calm and confidence. "I'm fine." she said with wonder. She gazed at Luella in amazement. "Lu, what did you do there? I just looked in your eyes and then everything went hazy. You were saying something, then it seemed to stop and it was OK again. And now I feel fine. Brilliant, in fact. What did you do?" Deanna looked at her in awe.

"Nothing!" Luella said, panicky. "I just looked in your eyes and told you you could do it! That's all, I promise!"

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Well, I believe you, although many wouldn't. You're obviously more powerful than you realise. Enemies of the Heir, beware!"

It was now Luella's turn to feel uncomfortable. The idea of having strange and unnatural Heir of Slytherin powers was not a particularly welcome one. "Come on," she said testily. "Let's get you to that ritual." And with that, she steered Deanna to Snape's office.

Snape and Mrs. Tyler were waiting for them when they arrived. Mrs. Tyler was perched on Snape's desk, holding herself. She looked terrified. Snape was pacing up and down grimly. They both looked up and started to see Luella there too.

"Miss Martin, what are you doing here?" Snape asked sternly. "Your presence is not required at this time."

"I know what's going on, sir." Luella said bravely. "And I'm not leaving Deanna. I want to watch." She stared Snape out.

Snape opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by Mrs. Tyler. "If she wants to watch, Severus, then let her. Hera knows I could do with the support." Mrs. Tyler looked more miserable than Luella had ever seen her. A chill went up Luella's spine. How dangerous was this ritual? Deanna's mother looked as if she were leading her only child to certain death.

"Very well." Snape said irritably. "Follow me." He led the way through the castle until they reached the hospital wing. A private room had been set aside for them, and in they went.

Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were waiting for them. Two beds had been set up and on one, Marlie was lying, dressed in her Hogwarts uniform. The room was torchlit, and in two censers, one on each side, incense was filling the room with a sickly aroma. Luella coughed, already feeling lightheaded.

"Well, Caitlin? Severus?" Dumbledore said gently.

"We are ready, Professor." Snape said curtly.

"Luella wanted to watch, sir." Mrs. Tyler said softly.

"Very well. Poppy, would you like to look after Luella for us?" Dumbledore said. Madam Pomfrey nodded and led Luella to one side. Dumbledore turned back to Snape and Mrs. Tyler. "We don't have much time. Her condition has taken a turn for the worse. She might not last the night, and your antidote can only delay the end. We need to hurry." Luella felt her blood run cold. Marlie's life was truly in the balance now.

Mrs. Tyler led Deanna forward, and motioned for her to get onto the other bed. Deanna lay down, looking fearfully at her mother.

"It will be alright, Deanna. I won't let any harm come to you." Mrs. Tyler whispered. Deanna nodded mutely. Madam Pomfrey stepped forward. She had a box full of

glowing gems in her hands. "These are special crystals that will attach themselves to your skin and monitor your health. If there's any changes, we can retrieve you." Deanna did not move as Madam Pomfrey pressed the crystals into her skin, before stepping back and allowed Snape to take over.

Snape stepped forward, producing a vial of potion. He handed it to Mrs. Tyler, who unstopped it and brought it to Deanna's lips. Deanna drank it and lay back on the pillow, closing her eyes. It was not long before the potion took effect and Deanna was fast asleep. Snape then produced another potion, which he administered a few drops of to Marlie. He stepped back and allowed Mrs. Tyler to begin.

She began to walk clockwise around the room, wand held high. The tip glowed softly as she walked.

"Great spirits of the Otherworld, hearken to me now. O ye Gods and Goddesses of all the Earth, listen now to your servant Caitlin Rebecca Tyler. I call on you now, come, fulfil my purpose."

"Lady Hera, Queen of Heaven, I call on you, give my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler strength, give her power, give her the authority to overcome all obstacles in her path. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lady Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, you who also returns from the dead this night, I call on you now, open the gates for my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler, admit her to your realm, allow her safe passage through your domain, keep back the demons and malevolent spirits that haunt your passageways, allow both Deanna Melissa Tyler and Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood to walk the Halls of Erebus and return unscathed, as you too must do each year. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lord Hermes, Lord of the Boundary, I call on you now, you to whom no place is forbidden, to whom no place is denied, who can walk in every realm, both that above, that below and in the world of mortals, grant my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler the power to walk also in all realms, to pass without harm or danger into the soul of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood, to transgress the boundary as easily as you yourself can, and guide her steps while there. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lord Morpheus, Lord of Dreams, I call on you now, allow my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler to enter the Dreamworld and pass without resistance into the mind, heart and soul of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood and walk with her in her dreams. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied!"

Mrs. Tyler paused. In the torchlight, with her robes flowing around her, she looked truly awesome. Her eyes flashed and her wand blazed with light. She motioned to Snape, who stepped forward. Moving over to a small table at the foot of the beds, he took up a small, sharp scalpel and held Deanna's right hand. Luella stifled a scream. Madam Pomfrey squeezed her shoulder and whispered "Don't worry. She'll be fine."

Snape smoothed Deanna's hand out, and without flinching, carved a rune into her palm with a few deft strokes. He let her hand go and took Marlie's hand, carving an identical rune into hers.

"Dagaz, the rune representing the bridge between worlds." Madam Pomfrey whispered quietly. Snape took both girls' bleeding hands and pressed them together, before binding them at the wrist. He stepped back and nodded to Mrs. Tyler, who stepped forward, wand held aloft.

"Blood meets blood and their bodies are joined." she intoned. She waved her wand over them. "Essence mingles with essence and their auras are joined." Now she brought her wand down to touch their hands, struggling to control it as it crackled with power. "By the power of the Most High Gods vested in me, the authority of Lady Hera to command all before me, the permission of Lady Persephone to enter the Misty Realms, the power of Lord Hermes to open all gateways and the power of Lord Morpheus to control dreams, I break down the boundary between Deanna Melissa Tyler and Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood. I lower the gate, I open the door, I allow them to join. Two become one, one enters the other, they are one heart, one mind, one soul, one dreamer! *Via! Unificatio! Syntegra!*"

The light from Mrs. Tyler's wand flared to unbearable brightness. Deanna gasped in her sleep, went rigid then limp suddenly. Marlie let out a piercing yell, arched her back, then fell back to sleep. However, her breathing was different than before. Luella realised that Deanna and Marlie were now breathing in sympathy with each other.

Mrs. Tyler was standing back, completely drained, all power gone from her now. She looked like she was about to faint. Snape got to his feet and went over to her. He was now wearing an expression of what seemed almost like tenderness. "It's alright, Caitlin, love. It will be alright." he said to her softly. "Sit down, rest. You've done more than enough now." Mrs. Tyler didn't respond, merely allowed Snape to guide her to a chair he conjured up for her and help her sit down. She held her head in her hands, clearly exhausted. Snape knelt next to her, patting her arm gently. Luella stared in astonishment. She'd never imagined that Professor Snape could be so, well, affectionate. He seemed more worried about Mrs. Tyler than he did about the two girls.

"Is it done?" Dumbledore asked. Mrs. Tyler nodded mutely.

"It's done, they're joined." Snape said distantly, still regarding Mrs. Tyler with concern. "It just remains to monitor them. Ensure we can retrieve Deanna if anything goes wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then all we can do now is wait. I suggest you all take a seat, I have no idea how long this could take." With a wave of his wand, he conjured chairs for them all. Luella sat down next to Mrs. Tyler and watched them fearfully. For better or worse, it was done. Deanna was in Marlie's dreams. All down to her now. She sat back in her seat and they began their vigil.

Deanna walked swiftly along the passageway that was opening up before her. She wasn't entirely sure where she was, but she guessed that this was either inside Marlie or leading to her. A light was visible up ahead and Deanna headed towards it.

She was about to enter, when someone stepped in front of her. Deanna recoiled in shock. It was Marlie.

"Halt, stranger." Marlie said sternly. Although dressed in Hogwarts uniform, Marlie showed no sign of recognition and simply oozed power. Deanna felt fear go through her. Would she let her in at all?

"Marlie, it's me, Deanna. I'm here to help you. Please, let me past." Deanna begged.

Marlie was unmoved. "What is your name?"

"Deanna Tyler. Look, let me through, it's really important." Deanna was fast losing patience.

"What is your quest?" Marlie said, ignoring her.

"To help you wake up and come home." Deanna snapped. "Let me in, why don't you?"

"What is your favourite colour?" Marlie asked. Completely non-plussed now, Deanna gave in. If Marlie was going to be weird, the only thing to do was out-weird her.

"Burnt sienna with a hint of terracotta." Deanna snapped. "Bloody hell, Marlie, you'll be wanting me to build you a shrubbery next."

"All wrong!" Marlie laughed triumphantly. "Sorry, dear. Can't let you in, I'm afraid."

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. This didn't look good. Wasn't Dream Weaver meant to guarantee entry if performed right? She began to have grave doubts about her mother's abilities. Until she felt something inside her head telling her to relax, open her mind and simply let the words flow. She did so and was amazed to hear the words coming from her mouth.

"I am Deanna Melissa Tyler and my quest is to enter the dreams of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood and guide her back to the realm of mortals. In the names of Lady Hera, Lady Persephone, Lord Hermes and Lord Morpheus, and the power and virtues they possess, I command you to open the gate and let me through! I am Deanna Melissa Tyler, I will not be denied!" Deanna stood trembling. Where had that come from? That was the language of high ritual, not an eleven year old. But if it worked...

Marlie was no longer laughing. The look on her face was serious now. "Very well." she said quietly. "Very well, you may enter. You are the Guide, I will not obstruct you. I wish you well in your quest." With that, she stepped aside, and allowed Deanna to pass. Deanna nodded respectfully to her and ran past, not sorry to get away.

Marlie muttered with annoyance. Such a weird dream she'd been having, all about Hogwarts, and her family, and some weird demon called Morticia. She wasn't sorry to

be waking up. She opened her eyes. Someone was poking and prodding her awake, and it turned out to be Rianne.

"Wake up, lazy!" she snapped. "Have you forgotten what day it is?"

"What day is it?" Marlie yawned.

"Saturday. And you know what that means?"

"A lie-in?" Marlie asked hopefully.

"No." Rianne snapped. "Quidditch. You're due on the pitch soon. Can't play without a Seeker, can we?"

Marlie got up cursing and grabbed her broom. If it was somewhat unusual to change from pyjamas to Quidditch robes in a second, and highly unorthodox to leave her dorm and find herself right on the pitch, Marlie did not notice. All she was thinking about was beating Gryffindor.

She was just in time for the pre-match handshakes. As she shook hands with each Gryffindor, she was shocked to notice that their usual Beaters had been sidelined in favour of the Weasley twins.

"Hello, Marlie." Fred was grinning.

"How did you two get on the team?" Marlie snapped.

"You're not the only one who's a Quidditch prodigy, you know. The whole team's just had a shake-up. We're Beaters. And this is our new Seeker." George indicated their Seeker.

Marlie turned to see the Gryffindor Number Seven. It was none other than Morticia.

It all came back to her in a flash. Where she was and what she needed to do. And she was suddenly aware of something else too. If Gryffindor won this game, it was all over. Morticia grinned at her sadistically. As they shook hands, Morticia leaned forward and whispered, "Not so strong now, are you, sister? We'll see who has the power now! The Snitch will be mine, and with it, the rightful power here!" She moved on, grinning evilly. Marlie felt her stomach twist itself in knots. Luella and Rianne had been right, with Morticia back, she was weakening again. And if Morticia got to the Snitch first, she was dead. It was really that simple.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the teams took off. It was perfect Quidditch weather, a light breeze and plenty of sun. Easy enough spotting the Snitch in this, Marlene thought. The game went on around her, but Marlie ignored it. All she was concerned about was winning. And that meant keeping her eyes peeled for anything remotely Snitchy.

Deanna cried out in pain as the tunnel she was walking down contracted tight around her. She felt herself grabbed tightly and pushed forward. Wincing with pain as it pushed her on, she closed her eyes and held herself tightly. So this is what being born's like, she thought to herself. Then, with one final push, she was thrust forward and staggered into the open air.

The cheering crowd brought her to her senses. She was in the middle of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch and there was a game in progress. One look at the players told her it was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. Marlie was instantly recognisable, her hair flowing out behind her.

The crowd were on their feet screaming. Deanna followed their gaze and felt her heart shoot into her mouth as the Snitch gleamed into view. Both Seekers were focused on it, and were heading for a collision.

"Go on, Marlie!" Deanna whispered. Marlie was a far better flier than the other Seeker, and certainly seemed to be winning. Until, that is, clouds covered the sun and it went dark. Deanna shivered with cold. Then from behind her, she suddenly felt a wave of pure evil hit her. A sense of foreboding looming over her, she slowly turned round.

She'd never seen them before, but there was no mistaking them for anything else. Those grey, hooded figures were the stuff of every mage child's nightmares, the dreaded Dementors of Azkaban. However, although Deanna felt cold at the mere sight of them, their attention was directed, not at her, but at the game above.

Deanna followed their gaze and saw with horror that Marlie had pulled up sharply. She was clutching her head and struggling to stay conscious. The other Slytherins were also motionless. The Gryffindors, however, were unaffected, and appeared to be taking full advantage. Their blonde Seeker was heading straight for the Snitch, and was going to win if someone didn't do something. Deanna stared at the Dementors again. Surely, somewhere, there was a charm her mother had told her about, a charm that could repel Dementors. Raising her wand, she pointed it at them and searched her memory for the words. She remembered an occasion when she was six, scared that there was a Dementor hiding in her wardrobe. And her mother gently letting her hold her wand and teaching her the charm that would get rid of them. She'd raised her mother's wand, recalled a happy memory and shouted the words, shouted the words...

"Expecto Patronum!" she screamed at the Dementors. To her surprise, something huge and silvery like a giant bird of prey soared out of her wand and flew towards the Dementors, scattering them. The sun came out again, and the darkness was gone. Deanna turned back to the game. Most of the Slytherins appeared to have come back to life, and Mike Lovegood sent a Bludger towards the Gryffindor Seeker, causing her to swerve to avoid it and lose sight of the Snitch in the process. The Seeker howled in rage and returned to circling. However, Deanna's eyes were still fixed on Marlie, and she saw that all was still not well with the Slytherin Seeker.

High above, Marlie had been first to see the Snitch, glinting away to her left. Immediately, she'd been onto it, glad to see that Morticia, far away at the other end of the pitch had yet to notice. And although Morticia did not take long to see her and start giving chase, she was still lagging behind. I've got it, Marlie thought. I'm going to win!

A cloud covered the sun. Marlie felt her skin begin to crawl. She looked down, and pulled up sharply as she saw the Dementors. "Oh gods." she whispered, terrified. "Gods, no, not Dementors, please no." She felt her senses go numb as a cold mist descended. All sort of memories began to crowd into her brain, none of them pleasant. Her father not recognising her. Her mother locking her up in the cellar. Fred Weasley and Morticia flirting. The decision made, so many years ago, locked in her bedroom, not to play with Morticia anymore. Voices belonging to her parents, her brother, her teachers echoed around her brain, telling her *"You're no good, you'll never amount to anything, you're weak, you're a fool, you're an airhead, you're a bad girl, we won't love you anymore unless you're perfect."* She clutched her head in fear and pain.

"No, no, no, please, leave me alone." she whimpered. Her head reeled and she felt dizzy. She didn't notice the flash of silver on the ground causing the Dementors to scatter like pigeons from a cat, or the sun warming her again. She felt faint suddenly, and couldn't stop herself slipping off her broom and plummeting towards the ground.

Deanna looked up in horror as Marlie slipped from her broom and fell like a stone. From that height, Marlie could never survive a fall. Out came the wand again as Deanna did the only reasonable thing. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The Levitation Charm did the trick and Marlie was brought gently in to land.

Marlie's eyes opened as she touched down. Deanna ran straight over to her.

"Marlie, are you alright?" Deanna gasped, worn out by her efforts.

She nodded mutely. "Yeah, I'm OK. What happened?"

"Dementors. They made you fall off your broom. They're gone now though. What's up, Marlie? What's happening?" Deanna stared at her in concern.

Marlie seemed to realise where she was. "The Snitch!" she screamed. "I've got to get back up there, if Morticia gets to the Snitch, I'm finished!"

Deanna soothed her. "It's alright, the Gryffindors lost it. They're all coming in to land, Madam Hooch has ended the game." It was true. The teams were touching down, and Morticia looked simply furious.

"Who's that?" Deanna asked, indicating Morticia. Marlie looked perplexed.

"That's Morticia." she said, bewildered. "She's my evil twin, I've got to defeat her to get home. I thought you knew that."

Deanna shook her head. "How should I know what's going on inside your head? I've only just got here."

Marlie blinked. "You mean, you're not part of me? You're the real Deanna?" She suddenly realised just how real Deanna looked. Not as if she belonged here, like Dream Deanna. And not wraithlike and insubstantial as she had been by the stream, but here, solid and unbelievably real. Next to her, everything else seemed ghostly and false. This was the real Deanna, here, now, and part of her dream. "How?" Marlie asked, stunned.

"Mum and Snape sent me over. To try and rescue you. Not doing too badly so far, am I?" Deanna grinned wryly.

"Thank you." Marlie whispered. "It was your charm that broke my fall, wasn't it?"

Deanna nodded. "I got rid of the Dementors for you too. Good thing one of us listened to her mother. I wouldn't have known about the Patronus charm without her."

Marlie was too impressed to be angry. "Wow, you got rid of Dementors! Only really powerful Aurors can do that!"

"Yes, well, we have more pressing worries at the moment. Your evil twin's coming this way and she looks hacked off for some reason. Wands out, you reckon?" Marlie nodded, and they turned to face her, wands at the ready.

Morticia did a double take when she saw Deanna. Even more enraged, she snarled at her, "You're not meant to be here! You're an intruder! That's cheating, inviting others in, Marlene. This is our fight!"

"I didn't invite her, she just turned up." Marlene retorted. "And bringing in Dementors when it looks like you might lose a Quidditch match isn't exactly fighting fair either!"

Morticia shrugged. "I didn't call them. They were your own inner fears and self-doubts holding you back. As usual. But they're not your worst fear, are they?" Morticia was grinning. "I do believe this is." The scenery wobbled and then disappeared. They found themselves in a dark, underground chamber. It was long and low, with pillars forming a central avenue. At one end was a statue of a cruel looking bearded wizard who Deanna recognised instantly.

"Salazar Slytherin?" she whispered incredulously.

"Greatest of the Hogwarts Four." Morticia hissed. "Source of your power. And of your worst fear, sister. Watch for the one who can call the Serpent!"

At her words, a tall shadowy figure stepped out of the darkness. Clad in black, he was no one any of them had seen before, yet they all knew immediately who he was. You don't need telling when one of your nightmares comes to life. He had a bald, white head looking more like a skull than anything, two nostril slits where his nose should be, and horrifying red eyes.

Marlie screamed. Deanna's heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to explode. However, she had courage enough to name him.

"Voldemort!" she whispered. "Oh gods, oh gods."

"One brave enough to name me." Voldemort hissed. "I'm impressed. But you're not that brave, are you, Deanna? Your ancestors would be most disappointed in you. But not as disappointed as yours, Marlene."

Marlie didn't answer. She just hid her eyes and whimpered. Voldemort laughed.

"So pathetic. Such a miserable specimen. Best to put it out of its misery. Although you are wise to hide your eyes, Marlene." He turned to the statue of Salazar Slytherin. "Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!" The statue's mouth opened and Deanna glimpsed something moving deep inside. Out of the darkness came something silver, moving stealthily out of the gloom. Deanna realised what it was instantly, as did Marlie, who peeked between her fingers, screamed and buried her face in Deanna's robes.

"The Slytherin Serpent!" Marlie was sobbing. "Please no, not that!" Deanna felt her blood go cold. Voldemort's warning to hide their eyes rang in her ears, as did stories her mother had once told her about what species the Slytherin Serpent was meant to be. She immediately screwed her own eyes tight shut. A basilisk's eyes could kill instantly. And there was no mistaking it. The Slytherin Basilisk was slithering nearer, and it seemed hungry. Deanna risked a peek. It was heading straight for them.

"Run!" she cried. Marlene staggered after her, sobbing in fear. They ran around the chamber, dodging behind pillars, blindly stumbling, terrified to even open their eyes in case they caught its deadly gaze. Voldemort was laughing at them.

"Run, my little ones! The three blind mice, see how they run. Ah, such sport is this!"

Deanna dragged Marlie behind a pillar. "This is no good, Marlie." she said softly. "We're tiring already. All he has to do is wear us down and then he has us. We need to blind that snake somehow."

"How?" Marlie whispered, her breath coming in gasps and sobs.

"We split up. You run, distract it. I'll use the Conjunctivitis Curse to blind it while it goes after you. Then we'll have a fighting chance."

Marlie felt sick. This sounded suicidal. However, since it looked like she was going to die anyway, she might as well die fighting. As long as it was quick.

"Alright." she whispered. Turning away, she dashed into the open. "Here!" she shouted. "Over here! Stand and fight, you legless git!" The basilisk turned towards her. Marlie ran in the opposite direction, all the while taunting it. The snake went for her, as Deanna had hoped. Taking careful aim, she whispered "*Conjunctivo!*" The curse hit the basilisk squarely in one of its eyes, causing that eye to start weeping and close up immediately.

The basilisk turned furiously to face her. Deanna shut her eyes again and turned to run. It still had one eye working after all. Marlie watched in horror as the basilisk chased

Deanna across the chamber. Then screamed as Deanna tripped and went rolling across the floor. The basilisk seized it's chance and reared back to strike. Marlie screamed "Deanna, no!" and buried her face in her hands as the snake darted forward and sank it's fangs into Deanna's arm. Deanna screamed in pain, and curled up in a heap. Voldemort, laughing, called off the snake and watched triumphantly.

Marlie ran to Deanna's side, tears rolling down her face. Deanna was clutching her arm in agony, her face pale and white. Her robes were covered in blood. Marlie cradled Deanna in her arms.

"Deanna, I'm so sorry, so sorry!" Marlie wept. "Don't leave me here, don't die, please."

Deanna shook her head, and gazed up at her. "Too late, Marlie. I'm dying, mate. All down to you now." She winced as the poison began to take hold. "Marlie, I'm sorry. Sorry I was so horrible to you. I care about you, I love you, you're my friend."

Marlie wept to hear this. "I love you too." she sobbed helplessly. "Please fight it, I need you! I can't do this alone."

Deanna's speech was starting to slur and her eyes were glazed now. "Sorry, mate. Tell Mum I don't blame her, it's not her fault. Or Snape's. Look after Luella for me, I think you know why." Deanna stirred and looked up at Marlie in pain. She forced a smile. "See ya in my next life, mate." Deanna looked deep into Marlie's eyes and smiled. She took one last, ragged breath and fell back. The light went out of her eyes, and the breathing stopped. Marlie howled in rage and grief.

"Deanna!" she screamed. But it was too late. Deanna was gone. Marlie buried her face in Deanna's hair and wept, giving herself over completely to the grief now flooding through her.

Chapter Seventeen: A Time For Forgiving

In the Hogwarts hospital wing, several hours had gone by. No change had been noticed in either girl. Luella was sitting next to Mrs. Tyler, who, although looking better than she had, still seemed on the edge of cracking up. Snape was pacing impatiently around the room, constantly looking at the girls, then at Mrs. Tyler, then back at the girls again.

"Try and relax, Severus." Dumbledore said kindly. "You'll be no use to anyone if you exhaust yourself like this."

"Relax?!" Snape almost screamed. "I've got the lives of these two hanging in the balance, this is a highly risky and experimental procedure which has never been performed on anyone in a Sleeping Death trance before, I've got to face the wrath of Mel Lovegood and the knowledge of what it'll do to Caitlin if it goes wrong, and you expect me to relax?" He stopped pacing, nearly at breaking point.

Dumbledore seemed unperturbed. "Severus, I understand your feelings, but there's nothing you can do for either of them at the moment. Sit down. They both seem fine at the moment. Miss Lovegood's picked up considerably in the last hour or two." It was true, Marlie had improved greatly since the ritual began, and Deanna did not seem to have worsened.

However, it seemed Dumbledore had spoken too soon. No sooner had Snape agreed to take a seat, than Deanna let out a piercing scream and went limp. Marlie screamed "Deanna, no!" Madam Pomfrey immediately leapt to her feet and began examining the scroll on which her vital signs were being written. Luella looked at the lines that were being etched on there by the enchanted quills. They were almost flat. Madam Pomfrey looked deeply concerned.

"Something's wrong. Deanna's breathing's erratic, her temperature's taken a dive and her heartbeat is slowing. We should get her back immediately."

Mrs. Tyler screamed in terror. Snape shot to his feet, shock etched all over his face. He raced to Deanna's side and held her cold, pale face in his hands. Turning on Mrs. Tyler, his eyes glittering, he snarled at her "Don't just sit there, woman! Get her out of there!"

Mrs. Tyler got to her feet, trembling. She looked as pale as her daughter, but to her credit, she didn't fall apart. She stood between them, touched her wand to Deanna's head and intoned, "Deanna Melissa Tyler, I summon you back to your own body. *Veni! Accio! Returnus!*" Deanna shifted in her sleep. Marlie yelped in pain and whimpered softly, whispering Deanna's name over and over again, begging her not to leave. Deanna gasped then relaxed. Her breathing seemed to ease, and Madam Pomfrey breathed a sigh of relief.

"Her heartbeat, temperature and breathing are returning to normal. She'll be fine, I think."

Snape nodded curtly. "Separate them, then." Mrs. Tyler waved her wand between them in a sharp, cutting motion.

"Essence parts from essence. They are two, not one." She nodded at Snape, who took up the knife again and severed the bonds holding their wrists together. Their arms fell limply to their sides. Mrs. Tyler intoned "The bond is broken, the gateway is closed. Deanna Melissa Tyler is herself alone. Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood is herself alone. They are two, themselves, whole and parted." She let her arms fall to her sides. "It's done."

Snape got up and touched his wand to Deanna's hand. "*Asclepio*," he whispered. The wound healed instantly. He did the same to Marlie. He then produced another potion. Lifting Deanna with one hand, he uncorked the vial with the other and let the potion dribble into her mouth. Deanna swallowed, coughed, blinked and woke gasping. She gazed around her for a minute as if unsure where she was.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Name yourself." Snape said sharply.

"Deanna Tyler." Deanna replied.

"Your parents' names?"

"Caitlin Tyler is my mother, I don't know what my father's name was."

"Your birthday and age?"

"16th July. I'm eleven."

"Who is the headmaster of Hogwarts?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

"Do you know a woman named Claudia Sherrington?"

Deanna looked blank. "Never heard of her."

"No reason why you should have. She was a Muggle socialite noted in our world only for her marriage to one-time Department of Magical Law Enforcement Head Mandragor Harker which produced two daughters, Narcissa and Melissa. The second of whom I believe gave you your middle name." Snape allowed himself to relax.

"Welcome back, Miss Tyler." He seemed to sag with pure relief. Mrs. Tyler abandoned all reserve and flung her arms around her daughter.

"Thank the gods, thank the gods you're alright! I was so afraid we'd lose you! Thank the gods you're OK!" Mrs. Tyler sobbed as she hugged her daughter tightly. Luella glanced at Snape. He was gazing at Deanna and her mother, both holding each other, Mrs. Tyler sobbing with relief, with an unfathomable look on his face. "Too much." he said softly. "This was too much to ask."

Luella turned away from him, and went to see how her friend was. "Deanna, what happened to you? Are you OK? How's Marlie?"

Deanna furrowed her brow, thinking. Suddenly, she screamed "Marlie!" and began struggling against her mother. "Let me go, I have to see Marlie, have to see if she's OK!"

"She's still asleep, love." Mrs. Tyler said gently. Deanna squirmed all the more furiously.

"I've got to get back in there, Mum! She's in danger, there's a basilisk in there, Voldemort too, if I don't get back she'll be next! Mum, you've got to let me go back!" Deanna pleaded.

Snape stood firm. "Miss Tyler, you are not repeating the ritual. Even if Miss Lovegood is in danger. I don't want two dead students on my hands."

"Who asked you?" Deanna snarled before turning back to her mother. "Mum, please, send me back!"

Mrs. Tyler, however, agreed with Snape. "Professor Snape is quite right, Deanna. You're not going back. There is no way I am going through that again. At least Marlie is no worse off."

Deanna protested, but it was to no avail. With both Snape and her mother opposed, there was nothing she could do. So she reluctantly took a seat next to Luella, let Madam Pomfrey remove the monitoring crystals from her and joined the vigil.

Marlie knelt on the floor of the chamber, staring numbly at the ground. Deanna's body had faded into nothingness shortly after she'd died, and now there was just her blood on the stones to mark what had happened. Marlie's initial grief had passed to leave a numb ache of desolation. She could hardly believe it. Deanna Tyler was dead.

Footsteps approached her. Listlessly, she turned around. Voldemort was watching her, a twisted smile on his face. Not far away, the basilisk was curled up, dozing.

"Well now, Lovegood. See what true power can accomplish. Your worst enemy dead. Aren't you happy?"

"She's not my worst enemy. She was my friend. I loved her. You murdered her." Marlie said dully.

Voldemort just laughed. "She would never have let you realise your true potential. Had you stayed with her you would always have remained in her shadow. Join me, and I'll show you what power really is. You'll learn how to wield your own power. You won't fear it any more, and you can control it, instead of it controlling you. Join me, Marlene. I can set you free. I can send you home."

"Never. I'd rather die." Marlie said quietly. It was true. Right now, death seemed the most attractive option.

Morticia was laughing, leaning against a nearby pillar. "You fool, Marlie. All your life, you've let your power rule you, and now when given the chance to change that, you turn it down? What sort of Slytherin are you? Lord Voldemort, finish her. Put me in charge. I'll help you." She gazed at Voldemort hungrily. Voldemort, far from accepting the offer, gave her a look of absolute disdain.

"I didn't ask you, Shadow. I only deal with whole souls, not disaffected parts of them. And tell me, pray, what right a Gryffindor has to walk in this hall of Slytherin?"

Morticia's face went as red as her Quidditch robes. However, the colour drained from her face as Voldemort motioned to the basilisk. "Deal with her." he said to it. The giant snake rose up and began to pursue Morticia. She screamed and, eyes shut, stumbled away. Marlie gasped in shock. Without thinking twice, she waved her wand, crying, "*Accio* Cleansweep!" Her broom was in her hands in seconds. Leaping onto the back of it, she swooped towards Morticia who was cowering on the ground, trying to shield herself from the basilisk about to strike. Marlie leaned forward, forcing all the broom's speed out of it. The basilisk pounced, but met only empty air. In the nick of time, Marlie sped past Morticia, grabbing her round the waist and pulling her on to the broom, then flying out of harm's way into the eaves of the chamber.

Voldemort howled with rage. The snake hissed furiously, cheated of it's prey. Morticia turned to Marlie in shock as they rode precariously above.

"You saved me!" she whispered, her voice sounding for the first time normal. "You could have let me die, but you saved me. Why?"

Marlie looked at her properly for the first time. So this was her shadow and her childhood friend. She remembered playing with her as a child and all the good times they'd had. Impulsively, she reached out and hugged Morticia, a rush of love filling her.

"I can't let you die!" Marlie said, realising for the first time how much she needed Morticia. "You're the sister I never had. You're my friend. You're..." She choked on tears, but carried on. "You're me."

Morticia's features changed from shock to a strange bittersweet mixture of sadness and joy. She threw her arms around Marlie and held her tightly. Marlie looked down to where Voldemort was still raging at them to come down, promising the world to Marlie if she surrendered Morticia to him.

"What do we do about him, Tish?" Marlie asked her, beginning to grin. Voldemort's rage and fury was quite funny to watch now they weren't actually in danger. Morticia still looked worried though.

"I don't know!" she said anxiously. "He... he's not part of us, Marlie. I needed extra power so I called him in from the magical collective mind. And now I don't know how to make him leave!" She looked despairing. Marlie looked at Voldemort more

closely. He did look different. Real, like Deanna had done. Marlie immediately regretted that, as Deanna's image brought tears to her eyes again. Stop that, I need to think, she thought to herself.

"Tish, any ideas at all? How did you summon him? I mean, if he's not really part of me, then he doesn't belong here and I can make him leave, surely?"

Morticia looked thoughtful. "Yes, I suppose you could. I mean, you are the dominant one here, you have the self-consciousness. I'm only a creation of your psyche, you are in charge of it. He can only enter if part of someone's soul admits him, but once in, he's very powerful. Only the dominant part has the power to make him leave and only then if the rest of the soul supports her. Even the Baron can only control Peeves if the rest of the ghosts back him up."

"You support me though, don't you?" Marlie said craftily. Morticia nodded, an evil grin spreading across her features.

"Of course, sister. What do you think? Shall we?"

Marlie nodded. Morticia produced a wand, and Marlie turned the broom around, so it was pointing at Voldemort. Wands held high, they both clutched the broom tightly as Marlie kicked it into gear and charged at him. Voldemort's look of fury turned to one of horror as the broom sped towards him. As he ran for cover, both girls pointed their wands at him.

"Begone from my soul, Voldemort!" Marlie yelled, saying his name for the first time in her life. "And never come back! You don't belong here, you have no power here. Begone! Begone! Begone! *Expulso!*" Light shot out from their wands and hit Voldemort head on. With a scream he disappeared, and the scene began to dissolve around them, breaking apart in chunks and floating away to leave only the night sky. Marlie pulled the broom out of the dive and sent it soaring upwards into the night. Above them, the full moon and stars shone down, sparkling as if to congratulate them. A sense of heaviness and oppression had disappeared, and Marlie realised she'd never felt so free before. Never so happy. She leant back and yelled with delight.

Morticia laughed. Marlie smiled. It was a change to hear Morticia laughing for the sheer hell of it. "Now what, Tish?" she asked, good naturedly.

"Time you went home, sister." Morticia said, a hint of sadness in her voice.

Marlie's face fell. "Already? But it's so nice here now!"

"Of course it is. But you can't stay navel-gazing forever. At some point, you've got to return to the real world. Don't look so sad, Marlie." Morticia said gently. "This is your soul. This place will always be part of you. In your dreams, and when you need it, this place is open to you always. I am here for you always." Morticia looked keenly at her. "If you ever need me, call on me. I will come. My power is at your disposal."

Marlie hugged Morticia again. "Tish, I'm going to miss you so much!"

"Miss me?" Morticia raised an eyebrow. "Marlie, you fool, we're never apart. I'll visit your dreams, promise. You'll see me again. Now, I must go. But before I do, just one last thing." She indicated one star that glimmered more brightly than the rest.

"Which star's that?" Marlie asked. It didn't look familiar.

"Not a star at all. The Golden Snitch." Morticia said quietly. "It's a Portkey. One touch will take you home. All you have to do is catch it, but that shouldn't be a problem for a Seeker as good as you."

Marlie smiled, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Thank you." she whispered. "I love you, Tish, you know that?"

Morticia looked away, embarrassed but smiling. "Marlie, you sentimental fool. I love you too. Now goodbye. See you around."

"Tish, wait!" Marlie cried. But it was too late. Morticia was fading away and within seconds, she was gone. Marlie felt a lump in her throat. She recalled Morticia's words. This place would always be part of her. Morticia would always be part of her. Feeling better, she turned her broom towards the Snitch. Time to go home. Speeding up, she felt the breeze whip her hair up, and the stars stream past her. This was just another Quidditch game, and that Snitch was as good as hers. Reaching out her hand, she felt it close around the tiny golden ball. As she caught hold of it, she felt something grab her insides, heard a whooshing noise and felt everything around her fade to black as she was hurled into space.

The silence in the small room was becoming oppressive. Marlie's condition was worsening, and even Dumbledore was beginning to lose hope. Would she make it? Several times, Mrs. Tyler had told Luella and Deanna they could go to bed if they wanted, but both had declined the offer. Deanna absolutely refused to leave Marlie, and Luella had no intention of going without her. Snape didn't say anything, just kept sneaking looks of quiet concern at Mrs. Tyler and Deanna. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey kept pouring over Marlie's vital signs readings looking very grim indeed.

All that changed around midnight. The Hogwarts clock could be heard in the distance chiming the hour. Suddenly, Marlie shrieked and sat bolt upright in bed. All of them started and looked at her in fright. Deanna remembered seeing her do something similar in her sleep before and expected this to be just part of the dream. Until Marlie sagged, relaxed a little and began looking around her, blinking in the torchlight, and coughing a little on the incense smoke.

Dumbledore glanced at Madam Pomfrey. "All signs normal." she whispered. "She's awake!"

Dumbledore immediately stepped towards her. "Miss Lovegood, are you alright?" Marlie looked at him and nodded. "Am I home?" she whispered.

"Yes, Miss Lovegood, you most certainly are." Dumbledore smiled. Marlie gazed around her, taking it all in. "What was happening here?" she asked in wonder.

"We were performing the Dream Weaver ritual. Deanna was sent in to try and help you. It seems to have worked."

Marlie nodded mutely. Then her eyes flew open as if she suddenly had remembered something.

"Deanna!" she screamed, before bursting into tears. "Professor, I'm so sorry, I couldn't save her, Voldemort got her, I'm so sorry." she wept helplessly.

Dumbledore smiled at her gently. "Miss Lovegood, there is nothing to apologise for. Deanna Tyler is perfectly safe, and right here."

Deanna got to her feet, trembling. Marlie looked at her and her jaw dropped. "You're alive!" she whispered. Deanna smiled and nodded. Next thing, she'd covered the distance between them and reached out to hug Marlie. The two girls held each other tightly, tears flowing down both their faces.

"You're alive, you're alive." Marlie whispered. "But how? I saw you bitten by a basilisk, you died in my arms!"

"It was only a dream, Marlie." Mrs. Tyler said softly from behind them. "We were able to bring her back in time. But it was a close thing and we came very close to losing her. Very close indeed." Luella noticed that her eyes were also filling with tears. Snape was staring fixedly away so no one could see his face. Marlie and Deanna didn't say anything, just held each other closely.

Dumbledore broke the silence. "Well, I daresay we've all had quite enough excitement for one evening. I think it's time we all went to bed. I need to write to Miss Lovegood's parents and tell them the good news. Caitlin, you may spend the night in the hospital wing if you wish." Mrs. Tyler nodded gratefully. Dumbledore smiled and continued. "Miss Lovegood will, no doubt, need to spend a few days in the hospital wing recovering, but I am sure she'll be able to return to her common room by next week. As for Miss Martin and Miss Tyler, you two should go straight to your dorm and recover. I would like to ask you to tell no one until Professor Snape has had a chance to inform Michael Lovegood. After that, you may tell whoever you wish, and no doubt will." He smiled benevolently at them. Luella grinned at Deanna. She might be vulnerable now, but given time and a few retellings of the story, getting bitten by a basilisk and nearly dying would become single handedly wrestling three basilisks, twelve Dementors, a whole legion of Death Eaters and taking Voldemort himself on in a duel.

They both hugged Marlie and promised to visit her again in the morning. Marlie grinned and said she could hardly wait. "Bring Rianne, we'll have a good old gossip. We've got so much to catch up on!"

Deanna smiled and turned to leave. Luella noticed that Marlie's right hand was clutched tight, holding something.

"What's that you've got there, Marlie?" Marlie looked at it, puzzled. She opened her hand. Nestling inside it was a tiny, motionless Golden Snitch.

Professor Snape escorted Deanna and Luella back to the Serpent's Nest. None of them said very much to each other. That night's experiences were still too fresh to be discussed. At length, Deanna broke the silence.

"Luella."

"Yes, Deanna."

"About that banner."

"Yes?"

"Any chance we could get it taken down?"

"Why's that?" Luella asked, curiously.

"Because if I ever see another Slytherin Serpent again, I think I'll end up killing someone."

Luella wasn't sure how to react to that. It was Snape who answered her.

"So Miss Lovegood was telling the truth. You were bitten by a basilisk." Luella detected a slight tremble in his voice, as if he was struggling with himself.

Deanna nodded. "Voldemort set it on us. I blinded it in one eye so we could have a fighting chance against it, and it bit me. I thought I was going to die. According to Marlie, I did."

When Snape spoke again, it was with great difficulty. "You came very close to it. We thought we were going to lose you." He paused. "That was a very courageous thing you did tonight. Not many would have done that. Or could have."

Deanna shuffled her feet and looked at the ground. "Well, Marlie did most of the work, you know. She had to get her head together and wake up without me." she said quietly

"That may be true. But she didn't have a choice. You did. And that is why I'm giving you thirty house points."

Deanna's jaw dropped. Luella gasped in astonishment. "Thirty points! Thank you, sir!" Deanna whispered.

Snape shrugged. "Think nothing of it. It's the least I could do for putting you and your mother through that. I believe this is where I leave you both." They had reached the

entrance to the Serpent's Nest. Snape inclined his head and set off for his office, after seeing Luella and Deanna through the door into the common room.

Needless to say, Rianne bombarded them with questions as soon as they walked into their dorm.

"Where the hell were you? And don't tell me you were studying with Snape. Neither Snape nor you two were in there when I checked at half nine. And you weren't in the library either." She gave them an accusing look. "Where were you and more to the point, why wasn't I invited?"

Luella and Deanna looked at each other and sighed. "Do you want to tell her or shall I?" Deanna said.

"You do it. You're so much better at dramatising things, and besides, I don't know the half of what went on."

So Deanna told them her side of things, with Luella chipping in to explain what had happened while Deanna was in trance. Both Luella and Rianne were stunned to hear that Deanna had saved Marlie from a pack of Dementors.

"The Patronus charm?" Rianne gasped. "Deanna, that's really advanced magic! How?"

Deanna shrugged. "I don't know. I can only assume that as they weren't real Dementors but Marlie's fears, I was unaffected and could dispel them without a thought."

When Deanna had finished, Rianne was open-mouthed. "I can't believe you did all that! Why didn't you let me in on any of it, I'd've watched! Hell, Lu and me would have joined you if we'd known!"

Deanna looked rather embarrassed at this. "Well, I didn't want you two to worry. Snape wouldn't have let you two do it anyway. I don't think he was entirely happy about me."

"He wasn't." Luella said. "You didn't see him after they'd sent you in. The way he was comforting Mrs. Tyler. The look on his face when it looked like we might lose you. And the relief when we got you back alright. Plus that thirty points he gave you. I think Snapey's rather fond of you, mate." Luella grinned at her friend.

"Don't say things like that." Deanna shuddered. "I don't want him being fond of me! Can't stand the oily git."

Rianne looked rather offended. "He's not that bad. I can't see what you're worried about, he's a very good teacher. And thirty points, did you say? Wow, Deanna, you're so lucky! I wish he'd give me thirty points." Rianne looked positively envious.

"Bet that's not all you'd like him to give you." Deanna murmured quietly. Luella caught her eye and grinned, trying not to laugh.

Rianne pretended she hadn't heard her. "I think," she said in her coldest Head Girl in waiting tones, "that it is high time we all went to bed. It's late, and we've all had quite enough for one evening. Haven't we?" She gave them frosty looks.

"Yes, Rianne." Luella and Deanna murmured as they slunk off to bed. Deanna winked at her friend as she slipped between the sheets. Luella, much comforted by the fact that Deanna appeared to have fully recovered, crawled into bed smiling, and was asleep within minutes.

They didn't have to wait long for news to get around. Mike was led off by Professor Snape after breakfast, and came rushing over to them during morning break.

"She's awake!" he told them delightedly. "She's going to be OK! And she reckons you helped her!" He seemed lost for words. Unable to say anything, he suddenly swept Deanna into his arms and squeezed her madly before planting a kiss on her cheek. Deanna staggered back, with an oddly blissed out look on her face.

"You saved my sister! How can I ever repay you?" Mike had tears of happiness rolling down his face.

Deanna mumbled something unintelligible, the shock of having been spontaneously hugged and kissed by the best-looking male in Slytherin having temporarily removed any ability to think and talk rationally.

Rianne intervened, a grin on her face. "I think what Deanna is trying to say is that it was nothing really, anyone would have done the same, and Marlie did most of the work herself, so no reason to go over board and pledge undying gratitude or anything like that, although if you're offering the entire Lovegood fortune and a proposal of marriage she wouldn't say no."

Deanna seemed to recover herself at this. "Rianne, shut up!" she hissed. Turning to Mike, blushing furiously, she said "Well, it wasn't really that difficult, you know. Marlie did wake herself up without my help."

"Rubbish." Mike said, grinning. "She told me about you taking on a pack of Dementors by yourself. And facing that basilisk. There's not many first years who'd have done that. Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you. My family owe you so much!"

Deanna dismissed him. "No you don't. Marlie's a friend, there's no debts between friends. I'll settle for your mother inviting me over a little more often and a go on your Cleansweep now and then."

"Done." Mike grinned. "Anyway, I've got History of Magic next, so I'll be seeing you tonight probably. Must dash, Kat and Summer will be over the moon to hear about this!" And with that, he was off to join the other third years.

Rianne and Luella were both grinning at Deanna. "Well, well, well." Rianne commented. "Now we know who sets your candle alight, don't we, Lu?"

Deanna glared at them both. "Will you leave it out? I was merely surprised by his response, that's all. Honestly, you two. Always insinuating something. Lu, make her stop."

Luella decided to support Deanna. "Come on Ri, he is the best looking Slytherin in the school. Cut her a little slack. After all, there are those among us with far more embarrassing crushes, aren't there?" She gave Rianne a knowing look. Deanna looked from one to the other, baffled but intrigued.

"Luella, you promised you wouldn't tell her!" Rianne howled.

"Tell me what?" Deanna asked, beginning to grin, curious now.

"Can't. I promised Ri I wouldn't say." Luella was enjoying herself immensely. Not often did she get the chance to wind up two friends at once. "Come on, let's go see Marlie." She headed for the hospital wing with her friends in tow, one begging her to spill the beans, the other threatening her with all sorts of nasty curses if she said anything.

Marlie looked much stronger when they saw her. Rianne went straight to her and hugged her tightly. "You made it! Well done, kid, we had every confidence in you." Deanna rolled her eyes. Rianne had been the least optimistic of the three, but she decided against telling Marlie this.

"It's good to have you back, Marlie." Luella said, her eyes shining.

"It's good to be back." Marlie laughed. "I tell you, I never want to sleep again after that. How long was I out for?"

Deanna and Luella looked at each other. How to tell her she'd missed three months?

Rianne said gently, "Marlie, it's Candlemas Day. The day of Persephone's return from the Underworld. Appropriate, really."

Marlie's eyes widened in shock. "Candlemas?? But it was Halloween when... Great Goddess Artemis, do you mean to tell me I've missed three whole months?"

The three girls nodded.

Marlie stared incredulously. "But... I've missed Christmas!" They nodded, sadly. "And my birthday!" she wept. Rianne nodded. Marlie's twelfth birthday, 25th November, had come and gone.

"Not to mention all the schoolwork you'll have to catch up on." Rianne said, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Marlie wailed with anguish.

They were interrupted by the door of Marlie's room flying open. Mr. and Mrs. Lovegood burst in, hardly daring to believe their eyes when they saw Marlie sitting up and talking.

"Marlie! My baby!" Mrs. Lovegood cried, running to hug her daughter. Mr. Lovegood did likewise, his face alive with joy. The three girls backed off and let the Lovegoods fuss over their highly embarrassed daughter. Mrs. Lovegood, breaking away, turned to them and began thanking them profusely for all they'd done for Marlie, before to Deanna's horror, actually hugging and kissing her.

Caitlin Tyler and Professor Snape watched from the corridor. Both were smiling.

"Such a relief, knowing it's all over, isn't it, Severus?" Caitlin commented casually.

"It is indeed." Snape said. "I for one am glad we need never go through that again."

"Absolutely." Caitlin agreed fervently. "Severus, I never had you down as the risk-taking type, but next time you have a crazy idea involving arcane and dangerous rituals, leave me and my daughter out of it, won't you?"

Snape grinned. "I'll try." His face became serious. "Caitlin..."

"Yes?"

"Caitlin, can you ever forgive me?"

Caitlin's face lost its merry smile. "Depends on what for. You've done so much over the years to hurt me, after all."

Snape chose to ignore the anger behind the words. "Risking Deanna's life. And asking so much from you, both magically and emotionally. I swore I'd never let any harm come to either of you, and look what nearly happened. I almost lost you both."

Caitlin patted his arm gently. "Severus," she said tenderly. "Severus, listen to me." Snape met her eyes. "Severus, we both knew the risks. I gave my consent for it to go ahead. And for what it's worth, you did well. I mean, look at what happened when Deanna nearly died!" Her voice trembled a little. "I lost it there completely. If you hadn't kept your head and snapped me out of it, we would have lost her! But we didn't. She's fine, Marlie's fine, and Mel and Lenny's marriage is fine." She indicated the scene in the room beyond, where Melissa and Leonard Lovegood were gazing mistily at each other and holding hands, much to Marlie's embarrassment and Deanna's amusement. The three girls decided to leave them to it at that point, and came out to join them.

Caitlin greeted them with a smile. "Hello dears. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Fantastic. It's great to have her back, isn't it?" Deanna said, glowing with pride.

Luella regarded Caitlin with concern. "Mrs. Tyler, are you OK? You looked exhausted last night." Luella had not forgotten the sight of Mrs. Tyler sinking into a chair with Snape comforting her.

"I'm fine, dear. I've had far more stressful things to deal with before now." Caitlin reassured her. "Amazing what a good night's sleep can accomplish."

Snape looked highly irritated at having his conversation interrupted. "Don't you three have lessons to go to?" he snapped.

"On our way, sir." Rianne said deferentially, before ushering Luella and Deanna along.

Caitlin watched them go, a smile creeping across her lips. "Those four remind me so much of us, Mel and Lily when we were young, it's frightening. What do you think they'll be up to next?"

"Organising the welcome back party, I don't doubt. And given that your daughter is involved, who by the way is the most devious child I've ever encountered, well done, it will no doubt involve countless minor infringements of school rules, enough petty theft to keep the youth courts busy for weeks and me having to intervene after we get complaints from Diagon Alley about the noise."

Caitlin laughed. "No doubt. Go easy on them, though, they've earned a celebration. I think we all have. Mel tells me she and Len are planning a holiday now. A little second honeymoon. Good for her, she's not had sex in three months." She lowered her voice, laughing conspiratorially. Snape was less than sympathetic.

"Three months? I've not had any in years. These married folk, one dry spell and they think there's a drought coming." he snapped bitterly.

Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "That long? You surprise me. I thought you'd have a string of mistresses on the side, all of whom seem to adore you in a mad, passionate sort of way despite the fact that you've never shown anything approximating kindness to any of them."

Snape laughed. "Ah, if only. Sadly, the type of poor, deluded woman who becomes slavishly in love with cold, cruel, dominant men only seems to exist in Bronte novels. I always seem to become involved with cold-hearted charmers who toy with my emotions, play me like a finely tuned musical instrument then callously abandon me. You, for instance." Despite the words, he was smiling at her.

Caitlin feigned outrage. "Severus, you know I've never been 'involved' with you!"

"Would you like to be?" Snape asked hopefully.

Caitlin choked with laughter. "You really are too much! I don't think Deanna would ever forgive me if I started seeing you." She gave him a sad smile. "Severus Snape, I don't know whether to take you seriously or not."

"What would you do if you took me seriously?" Snape asked softly.

"Run, probably. You still have the capacity to terrify me, even now." Caitlin regarded him with that same bittersweet smile.

"Then let's say I was joking then." Snape said, forcing a laugh. Something seemed to occur to him, for he suddenly held his head in his hands and moaned.

"Severus? What is it?" Caitlin said, alarmed.

"Third lesson today. Potions with the Slytherin and Gryffindor first years. Deanna Tyler and the Weasley twins in the same classroom, with Deanna in the sort of mood she currently is in. Oh gods, I can hardly wait." he said, his every word laced with sarcasm. He looked hopefully at Caitlin. "I don't suppose you want to take the lesson for me, do you?"

"No way. After last night, I'm doing you no more favours for a long time!" Caitlin laughed. "Come on, let's go. I should let you get back to the teaching you appear to love so much." Snape gave a derisive laugh. Caitlin smiled and continued. "I need to get back to the office, make sure Marcus Vetinari isn't planning a takeover bid in Mel's absence."

Snape nodded. The reality of Caitlin leaving hit him like a physical blow. "Caitlin," he began, "will we ever... I mean, that is to say," He hesitated, trying to find the right words. "Can I see you again? Just now and then. Just for a drink and a chat. No pressure, no commitment. But you were always the one I was closest to and I have to say..." He gave her his trademark hypnotic gaze. "I've missed you."

Caitlin smiled gently. "I've missed you too." She leaned up and kissed him gently on the cheek. Snape raised both eyebrows in amazement. Caitlin turned away, a bittersweet smile on her face. "But I don't know. I just don't know, Sevi."

"Don't know what, Caitlin?" Snape asked, his heart sinking.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for us to see each other."

Snape hung his head. He'd expected something like this to happen. "May I ask why?" he said softly.

Caitlin sighed. "I don't want to get hurt again." she said firmly, giving him a meaningful gaze. "I don't want my daughter getting caught in the crossfire either. I have to consider her feelings too. No one is more important to me than Deanna, no one. I might risk my own heart, but there is no way, absolutely no way, I will allow her to be hurt. Do you understand me?"

"Oh, I understand you all right, Caitlin." he said softly. He grabbed hold of her wrist. "Using your daughter as a shield to keep me at bay. Low, Caitlin. Very low. Aren't I worth the truth? Just admit I make your skin crawl and get it over with."

"Let go of me." she hissed, wrenching her wrist out of his grasp with a move that nearly broke his arm. Gasping with pain, he clutched at his arm. He'd forgotten just how strong she was.

She was gazing coldly at him with contempt. It was the look she'd given him at their last meeting before she'd gone into hiding. It had slashed his heart into ribbons then and the effect was not dissimilar now.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" she whispered. "Just don't have a clue what you did to me, do you? Listen, I helped you out for Mel's sake. I meant what I said back in December, Severus. Don't think that just because I agreed to this means I've forgiven you. I haven't. You ruined my life, Severus. I just about managed to claw my way back to sanity for Deanna's sake. I'm not jeopardising that. And I am never, ever letting you get into a position where you have that kind of power over me ever again!" Caitlin snarled at him, her eyes flashing with fury.

Snape averted his eyes. "You'd better go then." he said quietly, turning away. In a vain attempt to try and get her out from under his skin, he drew on his usual sarcastic manner. "Gods know I wouldn't want to trouble you further, after all."

Caitlin didn't answer. He heard her turning away and heading for the Floo grate. He heard her voice saying coldly "DDAE main entrance." and the roaring of the flames as they took her away once more out of his life. Snape looked to make sure she was really gone. And only then did one solitary tear make its way out of one eye and down his cheek, before being brusquely swept away.

Chapter Eighteen: The Final Victory

It did not take long for word to get around. By lunchtime, the whole of Slytherin House had heard the news, and by evening, the whole school appeared to know. Deanna found herself being patted on the back and congratulated by her fellow Slytherins everywhere she went. Members of other houses regarded her with nothing less than awe, and whispers along the lines of "Entered her dreams, apparently." and "A whole pack of Dementors? Really?" became quite commonplace.

Even the Weasley twins were impressed. During Potions, Fred leaned over to Rianne.

"Hey, Stormosi."

"Yes, Weasley?" Rianne said tetchily, annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of her Light-Footedness Potion.

"Is it true about Deanna and Marlie?"

"What about them?" Rianne sighed.

"That Marlie's awake, and that Deanna helped her by entering her dreams and fighting off a whole pack of Dementors, a couple of dragons, some basilisks, a band of trolls, four vampires, three werewolves and You-Know-Who?"

Rianne couldn't resist a grin at this. The Hogwarts rumour mill was doing its work already.

"Marlie is awake again, yes. And I believe Deanna did enter her dreams. However, as I was not there at the time, I couldn't possibly comment. You'll have to ask Deanna, won't you?"

Fred seemed to be considering this. He evidently decided that trying to get a straight answer out of Deanna was a non-starter, for he swiftly changed the subject.

"Is Marlie allowed visitors, do you know?"

"Close friends and family only. That's her parents, teachers, brother, Deanna, Lu, and me. You'll have to wait until she gets out of hospital next week. Although I daresay a Get Well Soon card and presents would be welcome. Now stop interrupting me, this thing's liable to explode if not watched carefully." Rianne was proved right as Geoff Foxworth's blew up and drenched him and Winter Montague, who both began tap-dancing frantically. Professor Snape snarled at them both as he administered the antidote and presented them with the necessary cleaning materials. This seemed to concentrate Fred Weasley's mind on his own potion, as Rianne was not interrupted again.

That night in the Serpent's Nest, everyone was discussing the situation. As Deanna walked in with Rianne and Luella behind her, the entire house, as one, got to it's feet and gave her a standing ovation.

Deanna went bright red and turned away, highly embarrassed. She squirmed even more as Mike Lovegood got to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Slytherin House!" he cried, putting his arm around Deanna's shoulder to prevent her from following her gut reaction and running out of the door, "Most of you probably have heard one version or another of this story, but I'm going to tell you all again anyway. This first year Slytherin, this brave, courageous, heroic, devious lady we all know so well as Deanna Tyler..."

"Stop it, Lovegood. Stop it now!" Deanna muttered, dearly wishing the ground would swallow her up.

Mike continued, ignoring her. "This wonderful young lady has surpassed herself yet again. Last night, with the help of Professor Snape and Caitlin Tyler the world-famous Auror, she entered the dreams of my little sister Marlie Lovegood in order to make contact with her and help her out so that she could wake up. And as you probably all know by now, she succeeded brilliantly. Marlie is even now sat upstairs in the hospital wing, eating, drinking and talking, and it is all thanks to Deanna here! Three cheers, everybody!"

Deanna stared fiercely at the ground as the three cheers were duly given. This was followed by a rousing rendition of "For She's A Jolly Good Fellow!" Deanna glanced at Luella and Rianne, who had joined in the singing and cheering and were now grinning madly.

"Did you two know about this?" she demanded.

"Not a thing." Luella grinned.

"No, Lovegood organised this one all on his own." Rianne said.

Deanna didn't have time to respond as Mike was now calling on her to give a speech. Deanna found herself pushed to centre stage as the massed Slytherins fell quiet.

She gazed round at them, not quite sure what to say. Shuffling her feet, she began with the first words that came into her head.

"Erm, well, thank you! I never expected this at such short notice. Mike Lovegood, I'm going to torture you slowly later for showing me up like this." Mike grinned. He knew Deanna well enough to know she didn't really mean it.

"However," Deanna was continuing, "while it's all very flattering to hear all the rumours flying around about how I single-handedly saved Marlie Lovegood from trolls, dragons, Dementors, basilisks and all sorts of things that I don't remember doing for the life of me, it has to be said that I only helped Marlie. I didn't do all the work for her. Owing to a near-fatal basilisk bite, I had to withdraw from the dream at a crucial stage, leaving her to fight on on her own. In the end, it was Marlie's inner strength, power, and above all, courage that saved her in the end. And it is Marlie, not me, that you should be honouring. Which leads me to something I wanted to discuss with you all anyway, and this seems like an opportune time to do it. Marlie's welcome party."

She paused and surveyed them, her embarrassment gone and her usual self-control back. They all looked back expectantly, anticipation on the air. What off-the-wall idea was this crazy little first-year planning now?

"As you all know, Marlie has missed three months of her life because of all this. Tragic enough for anyone. Even more tragic when those three months happen to include not only Christmas but your twelfth birthday. Indeed, I was talking to Marlie only this morning, and she was saying how upset she was that she'd missed both." Looks of enlightenment were dawning on some faces, although most still looked confused. Deanna grinned and built up to the big announcement.

"Which is why the poor girl needs the welcoming party to end all welcoming parties. And we are the ones to throw it for her. And what I am suggesting is this. Seeing as she was not here for the Slytherin Christmas Party, what we are going to do is put the whole thing on again so she can relive the experience. Plus, we are going to turn it into a birthday celebration for her! A belated Christmas/birthday party! Are you with me, folks?"

A huge cheer went up from the massed crowd. Luella and Rianne gazed at Deanna in amazement. This was her best idea yet. Deanna was now turning from showman to brisk organiser. She surveyed the ranks of expectant Slytherins.

"Alright, seeing as everyone's behind me. Here's what we'll do..."

The week passed without further incident, and on Friday afternoon, Luella, Mike and Rianne went to collect Marlie.

She was fully dressed in her Hogwarts uniform, and seemed her old self again. A week of Professor Snape's strongest Strengthening Potions and Sleeping Death antidote had cleared the last of the poison out of her system and done wonders for her energy levels. Luella was amazed at how healthy Marlie looked.

Marlie was putting the last of her Get Well cards and presents into her bag.

"All set, Marlie?" Mike asked her.

"All set. I just need to make sure I've got everything. Unbelievable, really, the amount of stuff I've been given. People I barely know have been sending me things. Fred and George sent me an amusingly shaped cactus, bless them." Her smile faded to be replaced by a sharp look of reproof. "Which makes it all the more obvious that my own house have sent me nothing! Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, even our Gryffindor arch-rivals, have been falling over themselves to send me flowers, cards, chocolates, Quidditch related things, Zonko's toys, you name it, I've had it. If even our enemies are so generous, why, pray, are my supposed friends so apparently uncaring?"

The three of them shuffled, not knowing quite how to answer without breaking their secrecy vow.

Luella spoke up, with her usual diplomacy. "I think, Marlie, it's just that everyone wanted to give you their things in person. I mean, we did ask Madam Pomfrey if we could all come up and pay you a mass house visit, but she wasn't very keen on the idea."

Mike and Rianne were nodding enthusiastically, as if to indicate that that was the intention all along. Marlie was not fooled.

"That doesn't explain why you three and Deanna have yet to get me anything."

"Oh, Marlie, you're so materialistic." Rianne said hastily. "We avenged you and saved your life, does that mean nothing to you? Come on, let's get you back to the Nest." And with that, she ushered them all out of the room.

Lucas Vetinari was standing in the open entrance to the common room, waiting for them to come around the corner. As soon as he noticed Mike step first around the corner, his blond hair instantly recognisable in the gloom, he darted inside.

"They're coming! Everyone take your places!"

Mike entered the room first, then stepped aside so Marlie could see for herself what was going on. As she entered, the Slytherins leapt to their feet, let off party poppers,

streamers, balloons, confetti, ticker tape and whatever else they'd managed to scrounge or invent, and shouted "Surprise!!!"

Marlie dropped her bags and clasped her hands to her face in shock. "Oh my gods!" she exclaimed. "What is this?"

Mike put his arm round her. "We heard how upset you were about missing Christmas and your birthday, so we organised a little get together for you. Happy belated Birthday and Merry delayed Christmas, sis."

Marlie, lost for words, gazed around the room in shock. The Slytherins had done an excellent job. The tree was back, as flashily decorated as ever. Paper chains, tinsel and fairy lanterns were everywhere. The Slytherin banner now read "Welcome Back, Marlie!" And on a table in the far corner was a huge buffet complete with a whole roast turkey, potatoes boiled and roasted, stuffing, cranberry sauce, chipolata sausages, cheese on cocktail sticks, crisps, peanuts, Summer Montague's Special Fruit Punch and everything you could possibly wish for at a party.

"You went to all this trouble just for me!" Marlie whispered. She turned to her brother and flung her arms round him. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me." Mike grinned. "Thank Deanna, it was her idea." Marlie turned. Deanna was standing by the fire, smiling. The Slytherins tensed. Last time they had seen Marlie and Deanna anywhere near each other for any length of time, it had usually meant much bickering and a blazing row. But a lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.

Marlie stepped forward. For a moment, the two girls did nothing but look at each other. Then, they both stepped forward simultaneously and hugged each other tightly, to the sound of rapturous applause from the onlooking Slytherins, who promptly began singing "For She's A Jolly Good Fellow".

"Welcome back, mate." Deanna whispered to Marlene.

"Thanks." Marlie whispered. They let each other go, but didn't stop looking at each other and smiling.

"You really organised all this?" Marlie asked after the singing finished.

"Sort of. It was my idea, but I couldn't have done it without this lot. Summer did her usual punch, while her, Kat, and Laetitia did the decor. Banner was me and Chris, of course, Mike and Marcus nicked the food, Jordan did the tree, party poppers and the like from Chris's dad's firm and Zonko's, with added sparkle from Lucas and Alex. And I think everyone contributed to these." She indicated the pile of presents and cards underneath the tree. Marlie gasped.

"Presents!" she squealed. She turned to Luella and Rianne. "You two, you never told me about this!"

"What, with Deanna Tyler threatening all sorts of dire punishments on anyone who spilled the beans?" Rianne snorted. "Not likely. Come on, sit down. Open them."

Marlie immediately sat down by the fire. Snowy, purring madly, leapt onto Marlie's lap and settled there. Marlie cuddled the cat, blissfully happy.

"Did you miss me, Snowy-kins?" she cooed to him. "Don't you worry, Mummy's back now. Who was looking after him?"

"Luella and me, mostly. Rianne was seen grooming and playing with him occasionally." Deanna told her. "Now, never mind the cat, let's be having your presents."

Marlie sat back as the gifts were brought for her to open. It took a long time. Finally, all but two were unwrapped. Luella and Rianne jointly presented one of them.

"We're not sure whether this really counts as a present, seeing as you designed it and all. So it's more giving back to you what belongs to you anyway. But here it is. Hope you're impressed." Rianne told her as she handed the package over. Marlie ripped it open and gasped in astonishment.

"The Walkmage!" she nearly screamed. "You... you actually built it!"

"Well, your dad did." Luella smiled. "But we were the ones who got him to do it in the first place. I'm not even going to bother telling you whose idea it was, you surely can guess by now."

Marlie, her eyes brimming with tears, turned to look at her friends. "You three are the greatest. I mean, those designs were just doodling really, I never thought it'd actually work! I never thought it'd ever get built." She wiped a tear away. "Thank you so much for making it happen, you're all wonderful!" Suddenly, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Just a second, those plans were hidden. So how did you..." She cast an accusing look at Deanna. "Deanna Tyler, have you been going through my personal belongings?!"

Deanna had the grace to look guilty before hastily distracting her. "You haven't opened my present yet, Marlie." she said, handing her a small box. Marlie took it from her extremely dubiously. It was a small velvety box of the kind used to store jewellery. Marlie flipped the lid open to reveal... "A Golden Snitch! On a chain!" she gasped.

"Look closer and you'll see it's not just any old Snitch." Deanna said quietly. Marlie peered at it. Her jaw dropped.

"Deanna, this is the Snitch from my dream. The one I brought back with me. You had it?" She looked stunned.

"I'm no expert on these things, but Dumbledore seemed to think it was a potentially very valuable talisman. So I, er, purloined it and sent it to your dad asking him to put a chain on it for me. Go on, put it on."

Marlie took it out of the box and unfastened it. The Snitch fell motionless as soon as she touched it. Deanna helped her fasten it around her neck.

"I will never take it off." Marlie promised her. "Thank you!"

"Kind of links in nicely to the next item on the agenda." Mike commented. "This one is something I got Sukey to knock out for you. Bring it in, please, boys!" Lucas Vetinari and Chris Bryant wheeled out a trolley. Marlie hid her face, embarrassed suddenly.

"A cake! Oh, you shouldn't have! Mikey!" It was indeed a giant birthday cake, shaped like a Snitch with twelve candles on it. The Slytherins spontaneously burst into "Happy Birthday", before Mike urged her to make a wish and blow out the candles. Marlie did so, after Rianne whipped out her camera and ordered everyone to assemble under the banner behind Marlie with her cake for a group photo.

Deanna breathed a sigh of relief. "Excellent, is that the rituals over with? Right, Luella and Rianne can sort out the tunes, everyone else form an orderly queue for the cake. After that, food, games and dancing, although not at the same time please."

Luella had the Walkmage assembled and Slade playing "Merry Xmas Everybody" in a moment before the Slytherins descended on the food. And with that the party began in earnest.

It went on for quite some time. Around half past nine, Professor Snape arrived to see what Deanna had managed come up with now.

"Hello, sir!" Deanna said innocently. "What brings you here? Not too noisy are we?"

"No worse than usual, although I'd like to request that whoever keeps playing that wretched Paul McCartney Christmas song stop it at once. It was irritating and banal in the Seventies and it hasn't improved with time."

"Good point." Deanna agreed. "Hey! Luella! Change the record. Put something decent on." Luella obligingly put Abba's Greatest Hits on. As "Dancing Queen" blared out of the speakers, Marlie responded by grabbing Rianne and dragging her on to the dance floor.

"None the worse for her experiences, I see." Snape commented dryly as Rianne and Marlie began miming along to the record.

"You wouldn't know she'd been ill." Deanna grinned.

Snape glanced around the room at the decorations. "Forgive me for asking, Miss Tyler, but isn't it a little late in the year for Christmas decorations? And what on earth is that supposed to be?" He indicated Marlie's new cactus, which now had pride of place in the centre of the buffet.

"That? Fred the Cactus. Present from the Weasley twins. New Slytherin mascot."

Snape was unimpressed. "Well if you think it's going on the official house badge, you are much mistaken. It looks obscene. You still haven't told me why all the Christmas decorations."

"Well, you see, Marlie was so upset about missing Christmas that we decided to recreate it for her. One of my better ideas." Deanna went over to what remained of the birthday cake. "She missed her birthday as well, so we made it a birthday party too. Rianne insisted on saving you a slice of cake." She picked up the last remaining slice and wrapped it in a napkin for him. "There you go. It's very nice. The Lovegoods' house elf made it, it's quite edible."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Thank Miss Stormosi for me. I can quite see what a sacrifice it must be for seventy young people to leave food lying around."

"Too right, if you hadn't turned up by eleven, I was having it." Deanna grinned. The look on her face turned serious. "By the way, sir, you were absolutely right."

"You surprise me. It is most unusual these days for young people in general and you in particular to admit that their elders are right about anything. About what, pray?"

"Do you remember when you were asking me to explain why I was hanging around with Crabbe and his friends? And I told you I was spying on them, then asked if the not being able to look yourself in the mirror ever went away?"

Snape seemed to soften a little at this. "I remember. Go on."

"I just thought you might like to know it's gone." she said softly.

Deanna couldn't have sworn to this, but the ghost of a smile seemed to flicker around his lips, and his eyes seemed to take on a genuinely pleased expression.

"Good. I'm happy for you." Snape said. And meant it.

"What about yours? Has that gone yet?" Deanna asked curiously. Snape's normal sneer resurfaced.

"I don't believe that's any of your concern, Miss Tyler. However, I will state for the record that it has eased slightly. I have things to be getting on with, so I shall leave you to your little soiree. Be sure to have ended it by midnight, or I shall be back and in a far less sociable mood. You have been warned. Good evening." And with a flourish of his cloak, he was gone. Luella approached Deanna, who was left staring at the wall.

"What was that all about? You know, for someone who claims not to stand him, you were getting awfully cosy with him. Better watch out, Rianne'll be getting jealous." Luella teased.

Deanna grinned. "He just wanted to make sure that we were all in bed by midnight and to not play any more Paul McCartney if we could possibly help it."

"Ah. A John Lennon fan then. Strange, I never had ol' Snape-eyes down as the hippie type."

"Now that I would like to see. Snapey with flowers in his hair." Deanna laughed. "So, Luella. What exactly did Rianne say about Snape that's so embarrassing? You have to tell me. Please?"

Luella grinned evilly. "I'll tell you later. Come on, help me choose the next records. I'm told someone's got YMCA somewhere around here, and I want to find it. Mike reckons Marcus Flint really likes it."

"You're on." Deanna said, grinning. "Flinty dancing to the Village People? This I must see."

Professor Snape left the Serpent's Nest in a better than usual mood. Munching on the cake that Deanna had given him, which proved to be really quite tasty, he found himself heading for the Hogwarts staff room. Tonight, he felt the need for company. I wonder if Caitlin's doing anything, he mused to himself. Then wished he hadn't. Caitlin's look of fury and her oh-so-well-chosen words the last time they'd spoken were still too fresh in his mind for him to really want to remember. And the worst thing of all was that she was absolutely in the right. What he'd done to her was unforgivable. He could hardly blame her for not wanting him anywhere near her. But that didn't make it any less painful.

Think of something else, he told himself furiously. Someone other than dear, sweet, beautiful Caitlin with those heart-wrenchingly gorgeous brown eyes and dark blonde hair that he constantly had to fight the urge to run his hands through. He shook his head in disbelief. No matter how hard he tried, her face seemed to be everywhere. Wouldn't the woman ever leave him alone? In a desperate attempt to banish visions of Caitlin Tyler lying on his desk in a sequinned set of dark blue dress robes, purring at him, he conjured Deanna's image to mind instead. This had the effect of bringing on a whole wave of far less pleasant emotions. Not that he didn't like her, quite the contrary. But every time he saw her, every time he looked into her eyes, he couldn't help being forcibly reminded of himself at the same age. There's another one who's suffered too much too young, he thought to himself. Someone else with those same mistrustful eyes, same bristling anger at anyone getting too close, same stoic bravery masking a frightening vulnerability. Snape recognised the signs all too well, and swore there and then to make sure Deanna was taken care of. He had visions of Deanna and her mother struggling on alone, Deanna having to live with the shame of being fatherless. He didn't know the details of her childhood, but something told him it couldn't have been easy. A pang of regret struck at his heart. He wished with all his might that he'd tried harder to find Caitlin sooner. I could have helped you, he thought. Supported you. You were and still are my best friend, despite everything. Some friend I turned out to be, he thought bitterly. Well, it was probably too late to salvage anything with Caitlin. But maybe it wasn't too late for her daughter. He resolved to do all he could to help her make something of her life, if she'd let him.

He turned the corner into the staff room corridor and came face to face with Professor Quirrell.

"Watch where you are going, Samael." he snarled.

Quirrell trembled. "S-s-s-sorry, S-s-s-Severus." he stammered, trembling like a leaf. Snape regarded him with contempt. Quirrell quickly changed the subject.

"Isn't it g-good n-news ab-about M-miss Love-g-good?" he said, trying to smile. Snape did not return it.

"Good news indeed." Snape said shortly, waiting for Quirrell to elaborate.

"I exp-p-p-pect you're p-pleased to have y-your S-s-Seeker back." Quirrell said, making polite conversation.

"I won't pretend it's not a relief." Snape said. Quirrell made to move on, but was brought up short by Snape's wrist shooting out and grabbing him. Quirrell shivered with fright as Snape's eyes bored into his.

"Be careful, Samael." Snape said quietly. "Don't think I don't know who gave Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson permission to get the Sleeping Death recipe out of the Restricted Section. Don't think I don't know who advised them on the finer points of brewing it. Or who planted ideas in Crabbe's head about how good he was at Quidditch, how that Seeker place was his by right and to what lengths he was justified in going to get it. Oh, I know," he said softly to the terrified Professor Quirrell, "that they'll never pin anything on you this time. But I am watching you, Samael. And if any of my Slytherins fall victim to Dark Arts again, then I shall make absolutely sure that whoever is behind it gets what's coming to them. Trust me, Samael, I know things that would have you practically begging to be sent to Azkaban rather than undergo them. Do you understand me?"

Quirrell trembled, but met his gaze. "I don't kn-know what you're t-t-talking about, S-s-s-Severus." he whispered.

Snape's expression did not change. "Good. Then there'll be no more trouble, will there?" He released Quirrell, thrusting the younger wizard away from him before walking away without a second glance. Behind him, Quirrell nursed his bruised wrist and watched Snape go, a look of hate on his face.

"Frighten me, would you, Severus?" he whispered. "You'll pay for that. You'll pay."

Slowly but surely, life in the Slytherin common room returned to normal. Marlie and Deanna's special status wore off, and they had to face the reality of going about classes as usual. Marlie in particular found the going tough, as she had extra classes, Quidditch training and a lot of homework to do as well as everything the rest of the year was studying. However, she was glad to report that Snape had exempted her from the end of year exams in the light of her special circumstances.

"So at least I don't have to worry about failing all my classes on top of getting all this work done." Marlie told them, her mood much recovered. "Plus I've been let off Flying classes as I'm already doing Quidditch training, so that's a little extra time. I was already ahead of most of you lot in Transfiguration anyway, so that's not really a problem. Herbology is really dealing with regular Muggle-style herbs at the moment, so it's not like I've missed too much there. Astronomy is practical stuff anyway, so I can just take up where I left off. And as for History of Magic, I very much doubt I need to put much effort in there. In fact, Professor Snape has excused me from doing any catch-up there, so I just need to leap in with you lot and get on with things. I don't think he thinks much of that subject either."

"The way Binns teaches it, I'm not surprised." Luella remarked. "You've really missed nothing. So just Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions you need to work at then."

"Exactly, which is where you three come in. Given that you're all rather good at those subjects, you can give me a hand with all the extra work I'll need to do, can't you? Admittedly, Quirrell and Flitwick are big softies, but Snape scares me."

"Wuss." Deanna grinned. "OK, I'll give you a hand with Charms, Lu and Ri can sort you out with Potions and we'll all help out with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Right, that's your work sorted out. Now on to more important things. You are of course aware that at the end of the month, in less than two weeks time, we have the Ravenclaw match that will no doubt decide the tournament." She gave Marlie a piercing stare.

Marlie shifted uneasily. "Yes, I know. You keep reminding me, Flint keeps reminding me, Mike keeps reminding me, everyone keeps reminding me! Look, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape both reckon I'm match-fit, and I'm doing OK in training, so leave it."

"It's not your physical fitness we're concerned about." Rianne said firmly.

Marlie looked even more uncomfortable. "So what is it then?"

"Well, are you really confident enough yet? Are you really OK about Quidditch again? Especially after what happened after the last match."

"Rianne, don't fuss." Marlie snapped irritably. "I'm fine. We're going to go out there and we're going to win. Now leave me alone, I have work to do."

However, Marlie was not nearly as confident as she pretended. She wasn't the same as she had been before. And although it had been her flying skills that had saved her in the dream trance, her body had not been on a broom for three months and she knew it. She was woefully out of practice, and three Quidditch sessions a week was not going to remedy the situation in time. And try as she might to pretend that all was well, it clearly wasn't.

On her way back from the final training session before the match, Marlie was close to tears. Flint had bawled her out for missing the practice Snitch even though it had been

almost in front of her. And the rest of the team, even Mike, were giving her looks ranging from pity to intense anxiety. I'm not up to it, Marlie thought. There is no way we're going to beat Ravenclaw with me like this.

She went straight to her dorm, picked up Snowy and lay back, feeling sick with nerves. She held the cat up and looked into its eyes. "What do I do, Snowy? Any ideas?" She thought of flying under the stars with Morticia and how peaceful it had been. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to go back there. Morticia's words came back to her. "This place will always be part of you. In your dreams, and when you need it, this place is open to you always. I am here for you always. If you ever need me, call on me. I will come. My power is at your disposal." Well, if ever she needed Tish, it was now. Reaching inside her robes, she pulled out the Snitch and gazed into its reflective surface. Allowing herself to relax, she whispered Morticia's name over and over again.

Morticia's face materialised in the Snitch. "What is it, sister?" Marlie heard that familiar voice whispering in her ear.

"I need your help, Tish." Marlie whispered. "I've got a Quidditch game against Ravenclaw in two days time and I'm not sure I'm up to it. Help me!"

Morticia smiled. "The Dementors getting you down again, are they? Marlie, they can't really hurt you, you know that? Trust yourself! Your body knows how to be an excellent Seeker, your body remembers how to do it. It is your mind getting in the way. You need to quieten down your mind and shut it up so your body can get on with winning."

"Yes, and? Rianne said much the same earlier! I was hoping you'd know how." Marlie snapped irritably.

"Not I. You will need outside help to fight off the Dementors. Last time it was Deanna who saved you. This time, another of your friends is the one to do it." Morticia said cryptically.

"Which one?" Marlie asked.

"The one who can control the Serpent, of course. The one who would have been able to survive a basilisk attack. You know who I mean."

"Who?" Marlie cried. "Tish, tell me!" But it was too late. Morticia was fading, and next minute, she was gone.

Marlie dropped the Snitch in frustration. So who could help, if not Deanna? Someone who could control a basilisk. No one she knew could do that. Sighing, she got up and went to the common room.

Deanna, Luella and Rianne were busy playing with a Jenga set left over from the party. Marlie walked in to find them engaged in an argument as to whether Levitation Charms were in contravention of the rules or not.

"Look, I keep telling you, there's just as much chance of a Levitated piece dislodging the entire ensemble as one pulled out by hand!" Deanna was claiming.

Rianne was sceptical. "Yes, but you have overlooked the fact that if you are not physically touching the Jenga tower, you eliminate the risk of accidentally pushing it over, don't you?"

"Not if you're bad at Levitation Charms, you don't!" Deanna told her.

"Which just happens to give you a clear advantage, doesn't it?" Rianne said scathingly. "Ah, Marlie, just the person. Give us your honest opinion, is using magic to withdraw a Jenga block legal?"

"Couldn't care less, Ri. Probably not." Marlie sat down wearily. She surveyed her friends despairingly. None of them looked like the type to call off a basilisk. Rianne and Deanna, currently squabbling like children, certainly didn't seem like powerful witches at the moment. And while Luella was without question academically bright, Marlie couldn't think of anyone more normal. Hard to believe she was the Slytherin Redeemer.

Marlie looked up and saw the banner behind Luella's head, it's twin basilisk Slytherin Serpents twisting eerily in the firelight. It came to her suddenly. The Slytherin Serpent. One who had power over it. The Redeemer. It had to be Luella.

She looked at Luella again. She was looking back at her, concerned. Marlie decided to risk it. "Lu." she began. "Can I talk to you alone for a bit?"

Luella smiled lazily. "No problem. I doubt these two will miss me. I'm just going to give Marlie a hand with something. Won't be long, you two. Carry on without me." Deanna and Rianne acknowledged her and returned to arguing, barely aware of Luella and Marlie leaving.

Luella entered their dorm and settled down on her bed with Sooty. "Well now, Marlie." she said pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

Marlie hesitated before taking the plunge. "Well, it's about the match."

"What about it?" Luella said sharply, the warm, fuzzy attitude gone in an instant.

"I can't do it, Lu." Marlie said, shaking. "I'm out of practice, my reflexes are shot to pieces, I can't concentrate on anything, I keep imagining a crowd of Dementors turning up and making me fall off my broom, and there's just no way I can compete like this! Help me!" Marlie practically begged her.

Luella softened. "I thought there was something up. You've not been yourself lately. Can't hide things from me, you know."

"I know, I know." Marlie sighed. "What do I do, Lu? I can't back out, we'll lose for certain. We don't have a reserve Seeker any more, do we? But I can't play like this. My concentration is shot to hell."

Luella's heart bled for her. Marlie seemed so lost and frightened. Yet what could she do? I can't wave a wand and make it all better, and a Confidence Potion is beyond me. I'm not Snape, after all! she thought.

A little voice spoke quietly at the back of her mind. Oh no? it was saying. Remember Dream Weaver? Deanna didn't think she could do that either. Until you talked her into it.

Luella squirmed at the memory. She'd somehow managed to hypnotise Deanna into being brave enough to go through with it. But could she do it again? Only one way to find out.

"Marlie, there is one thing. But it may not work, I've only ever been able to do it once and it was an accident then."

Marlie leapt at the chance. "Luella, if there is anything you could possibly do to sort me out, I will love you madly for the rest of my life. I don't care what it is, just do it! I'll try anything. Please?"

"OK, I'll give it a go. Sit next to me and look into my eyes. Then just take a few deep breaths and relax." Marlie nodded and did so. Luella took a few deep breaths herself and began.

"Listen, Marlene. You are the best Seeker in the school. You are an amazing flier, you have the fastest reflexes anyone here has ever seen, and you have always managed to catch the Snitch every time you've played. You are going to win on Saturday, and you are going to win handsomely. That Snitch is already yours. You will find it virtually straight away. You will find it and you will win. Do you understand me?" Luella said softly but firmly.

It worked. Marlie said nothing, just gazed at her fixedly. Then she shook herself. "Well, Lu?" she asked anxiously. "You going to do it, then?"

Luella smiled. "Depends. How are you feeling about the match now?"

"Still terrified. I mean, just the mere thought of flying..." She stopped. Luella watched with interest as the mere thought of flying weaved its way through Marlie's mind.

"You know something, I'm not scared at all." Marlie said thoughtfully. "I mean, what was I worried about? I'm the star Seeker, aren't I? Of course I can bloody do it. Sorry I wasted your time, Lu."

"Perfectly alright, Marlie. I mean, if you're frightened, it's best to talk things over. Probably just admitting your fear cured you."

"You're probably right." Marlie said cheerily. "What were you going to do, by the way?"

"Doesn't matter." Luella said quickly.

"Oh. Right." Marlie didn't seem that interested. "Come on then, let's go and see if Deanna and Rianne have stopped arguing."

Saturday morning brought with it some of the worst weather any of them had seen for a long time. The sky was so dark that sunrise made no appreciable difference in the light levels, and the rain was lashing down almost vertically.

Luella viewed the Great Hall roof in shock. "They can't expect you to play in that, surely? How on earth are you going to even see the Snitch in this?"

Rianne laughed. "Ah, come on, it's only a little rain. You don't call off a Quidditch match just because the weather's awful."

Deanna nodded. "Quidditch is a bit like rugby, it goes ahead in all weathers. I remember one year, the All-Britain Quidditch Cup Final took place in very similar conditions. Chudley Cannons versus Haverfordwest Horntails. The Hornies ran away with it, of course. The Cannons completely unused to playing in such weather. Typical soft English bastards."

Marlie looked offended. "Just because it's always bloody raining in Wales. I still maintain that we should have had a penalty for that deliberate and unprovoked foul on our Seeker."

"Deanna, you live in bloody Surrey, why are you supporting a Welsh Quidditch team?" Rianne said curiously.

"My mum's family are from Wales. I was born there. Apparently we've got an ancestral family home out there, but it's in ruins. Maybe one day I'll get it renovated." Deanna mused absently.

Luella raised an eyebrow. This was the first she'd heard about an ancestral family home. She remembered the huge pile of Galleons in the Tylers' Gringotts vault and realised how little she actually knew about Deanna's family. How little she knew about Deanna. This was the first time Deanna had spoken about her Quidditch team or her family. Deanna had obviously been forbidden to talk about things like that before coming to Hogwarts and Luella had never thought to ask before now, assuming that she already knew that sort of thing. How wrong she was.

The weather had not improved as the teams filed onto the pitch. In fact, if anything, it had got worse. Luella, Deanna and Rianne were using the banner to shelter under.

"Do you reckon Marlie'll be OK in this weather?" Deanna asked anxiously. "I mean, she's going to have her work cut out for her. Alright for the Hornies to win when it's like this, but she's only a kid. And an out of practice one at that."

"She will be. She has to be." Rianne said, trying to sound confident. "If we win this, the Cup's ours. If we lose, then we've got to beat Hufflepuff by a pretty big margin to be certain. She'll win. She has to. Right, Lu?"

"Whatever you say, Ri, you know more about Quidditch than I do." Luella said pensively, watching the teams parade out. The announcer had finished announcing the Ravenclaw line-up and was now going through the familiar Slytherin list of "Foxworth! Flint! Lovegood! Montague! Stormosi! Vetinari! Aaaaand... Lovegood!"

A huge cheer went up as Marlie was called out, and not just from the Slytherin end. All around the stadium, Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were getting to their feet and giving Marlie a standing ovation. As the three Slytherins watched, Marlie peeked out from under her green Quidditch hat and waved back to them all, smiling proudly.

The match got underway. Ravenclaw won the toss and had possession of the Quaffle first, passing towards the Slytherin end. The Slytherins played as well as they could, but Ravenclaw worked better together, and certainly coped more with the rain. Before long, Slytherin were fifty-ten down. Deanna groaned softly, her head in her hands.

"Come on, Marlie, find the Snitch. Quickly!" Rianne whispered. Luella didn't say a word, hardly daring to speak.

"Don't suppose either of you two know any weather magic?" Deanna asked hopefully. Rianne shook her head. Deanna returned her attention to the game and promptly howled as Ravenclaw scored again and Laetitia Vetinari was almost unseated by a Bludger that Mike had failed to spot, much to Flint's fury.

Luella looked at Marlie. High up on her Cleansweep, Marlie seemed to be struggling against the wind. The Ravenclaw Seeker was male and in the fifth year, and consequently was finding it much easier to control his broom in the howling gale than Marlie, an twelve year old girl, was. Although Marlie's face was not visible, her body language said it all about how lost and hopeless she was feeling. Luella concentrated hard, willing Marlie to find her strength.

Marlie seemed to reach inside her robes at that point and pulled out a small shining object that Luella guessed must be her Snitch necklace. She seemed to look deep into it for a moment before squeezing it and tucking it away again. Her confidence seemingly renewed, she began looking rather more purposeful.

Scanning the arena carefully, Marlie was on the look out for anything that might be the Snitch. It wasn't easy making anything out in this rain, and both she and the Ravenclaw Seeker had gone after false alarms before now. Claspng her own Snitch under her robes, she felt it's reassuring warmth. Concentrating hard, she willed the

other Snitch to appear. "Snitch to Snitch, brother to brother, call your twin, one to the other!" she whispered, inventing a spell on the spot. She felt the Snitch flap its wings, and looked around hopefully.

Suddenly she saw it. A flash of silver over near where the Gryffindors had assembled. Marlie, seeing the Ravenclaw Seeker looking in the other direction, nonchalantly began to fly towards it. The Snitch wasn't moving, just hovering in mid-air. Marlie began to speed up slightly. The Ravenclaw captain suddenly noticed her and shouted at the other Seeker, who was now looking towards her. Marlie abandoned all attempt at subterfuge and, flattening herself against her broom, kicked it into gear and flew at the Snitch for all she was worth.

The other Seeker gave chase, and the match was on. Marlie did have a head start and a faster broom, but on the other hand, the Ravenclaw Seeker was bigger and heavier, and flew far better in the wind. And it was not long before he was gaining on her. Marlie gritted her teeth and pushed her broom with all her strength, willing it to go faster. The crowd were on their feet, screaming. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a flash of blue. He was almost alongside her now. She focused on the Snitch. Close, so close.

The Ravenclaw overtook her and reached out his hand. The Snitch would be his if she didn't do something. "No, you can't win now!" she whispered.

Suddenly, the other Seeker veered sharply to the right. A Bludger had whizzed out of nowhere, hit by Mike in an attempt to distract the Ravenclaw Seeker. It worked. As the Ravenclaw swerved to avoid it, he was caught by a gust of wind and blown off course. It was now or never. "Thanks, Mikey!" Marlie whispered with relief as she forced her broom forward. The Ravenclaw Seeker, struggling to reach her against the wind, could only watch in frustration as Marlie swooped forward and caught the Snitch deftly in the palm of her hand.

Down below, the watching Slytherins went mad. Rianne, Deanna and Luella clutched each other in a group hug. "We did it! We did it!" Deanna was shouting. "We won!"

Next to them, Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were frantically trying to work out what that meant for the championship scores. "According to my calculations, the only way anyone else can win it now is if we lose to Hufflepuff by more than 200 points and Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by 300 points which is not going to happen because the Ravens are too good, and the only way we're going to lose to Hufflepuff is if half the team drop dead and we have to play our reserves. It's as good as ours, my friends!" Lucas was yelling. The three girls held each other all the harder.

Back on the pitch, the players were coming in to land. Marlie was being hugged and screamed at by the other Slytherins, delirious with joy.

"You did it, you did it!" Kat was screaming. "We've won!"

"Don't thank me, thank Mikey!" Marlie laughed. "If he hadn't sent that Bludger over, I'd never have made it!" Kat immediately hugged Mike and kissed him on the cheek, leaving him flushed and with a slightly dopey grin on his face.

The Slytherin spectators had by this time left their seats and invaded the pitch en masse. Deanna, Luella and Rianne were the first to reach Marlie.

Deanna immediately flung her arms round her, weeping with joy. "You did it! Well done, mate!" she enthused joyously.

"Yeah, well done! We had every confidence in you!" Rianne shouted.

"Couldn't have done it without you three!" Marlie grinned, hugging them back. "You saved me from Sleeping Death, you got the ones who did it expelled, and you gave me back my belief in myself. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Deanna airily waved her hand. "Think nothing of it. We're your mates, that's what we're for!"

"Let's face it, we four make a great team, don't we?" Rianne grinned.

"Absolutely!" Deanna agreed. "Put it there, folks." She held out her hand. All four of them clasped their hands together. Deanna spoke again. "Together we can do anything. Together we can take on the world. Together we can beat even Voldemort, and most definitely Gryffindor. Can't we?"

"Yeah!" the other three yelled.

"So let's always work together. Let's not fight amongst ourselves, let's always help each other out, let's swear eternal friendship on the Great Serpent!" Deanna was getting carried away, apparently forgetting that her last encounter with a Slytherin Serpent had nearly proved fatal.

"Friends." Rianne agreed.

"For life." Luella promised.

"On the Great Serpent." Marlie grinned. The four of them shook hands and let each other go. As Marlie was immediately mobbed by hysterical Slytherins, Luella stood back in a daze. It had been an amazing six months since she received her Hogwarts letter. She couldn't believe that so much had happened since then. Back in the summer, she'd been the class outcast, nondescript, quite bright but otherwise nothing special. Now here she was, a witch, Slytherin Redeemer, apparently possessed of the ability to hypnotise people, top of most of her subjects, or at least in the top five (apart from Flying), and a member of the Slytherin in-crowd. She looked at her three friends. I've got a proper social life, she thought. Not just me and Deanna anymore. She hugged herself with joy at the thought. Of all the things to have changed, she valued this one most of all. She suddenly began to feel more confident about her eventual destiny. With these three beside her, she could accomplish anything. Even beating Voldemort. And with that, she put these thoughts behind her and followed the rest of her house to what promised to be their best celebration yet.

FINIS

Until Part Two...

Slytherin Rising, Part Two: Slytherin On The Wane

by J. L. Matthews

Chapter One Platform Nine and Three Quarters

September 1st, 1991. Platform Nine and Three Quarters, King's Cross Station, London.

"Where are they?" Deanna Tyler was saying anxiously. "They're surely here somewhere aren't they?" She cast concerned looks around the platform, dark eyes scanning every face. Deanna Tyler, a third year student at Hogwarts School, was a shorter than average young girl, rather thin, with shoulder-length jet black hair to match her eyes, high sharp cheekbones, delicately pointed nose turned up at the end, one of the few features she shared with her mother, and a tough, aggressive manner which could be easily misleading as to her true character.

"Course they are." her best friend Luella Martin said calmly. "They're hardly going to miss the Hogwarts Express, are they? I mean, Marlie might, but I can't see Rianne wanting to avoid school. Not to mention a certain Potions Master we all know and, er, know." Luella, only a month older than Deanna and her inseparable partner in crime, about the same height but slightly chubbier in build, was fiddling absently with a strand of chestnut-brown hair that had come loose from it's usual ponytail, silvery-blue eyes gazing at Deanna in amusement.

"Luella Martin, can you be referring to Professor Snape?" Deanna's mother said wryly. Caitlin Tyler, Deputy Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication and a renowned Auror, was dressed for the work she would soon be heading back to, in a charcoal grey Muggle trouser suit worn under a dark blue cloak which set off her honey-blonde hair nicely. She was attracting not a few admiring glances from various passing wizards, at least until their wives noticed.

"Of course. Why, has he retired? Are we getting a new Potions teacher?" Luella said, feigning surprise. Mrs. Tyler laughed.

"No, of course he hasn't. He's only my age! Not a word out of you, Deanna." she said sharply to her daughter who was grinning fiendishly.

"Never dreamt of saying anything, mother dearest." Deanna said innocently. Mrs. Tyler chose to turn a blind eye as a flash of platinum blond hair caught her attention.

"Hi there Mel!" she called out, fully expecting to come face to face with her friend and colleague Melissa Lovegood, Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication. The woman she'd been addressing turned around. Mrs. Tyler stopped short.

It wasn't Melissa Lovegood at all, but she did look exceedingly like her. Same cool blue eyes, same pale blonde hair. However, the similarities ended there. Melissa's

usual conservative style was a huge contrast to the sleek robes, mink cloak, rather too much make-up and expensive jewellery this witch was wearing. Luella was reminded of a blonde Morticia Addams with Cruella De Ville's dress sense. Mrs. Tyler said nothing, just gazed at her quietly.

The woman looked back uncertainly. "Caitlin Tyler?" she said incredulously. Mrs. Tyler nodded. The other witch gazed at her. Her lips curled into an unpleasant smile.

"Never thought I'd see you here of all places. When did you settle down with a nice wizard and raise a family, then? Oh, but of course. You didn't, did you? Who knows where that fatherless brat of yours came from?" She looked pityingly at Deanna, who stared back at her in shock and fury.

Luella looked fearfully at Mrs. Tyler. It was true, Deanna was born out of wedlock and no one knew who her father was. Mrs. Tyler had always refused to speak about him. However, there had always been a pretence that Mrs. Tyler had been married but her husband had been killed by Lord Voldemort, the most evil Dark wizard ever, before Deanna was born. Which explained why Mrs. Tyler had gone cold all of a sudden and was gazing back at this woman with unbridled hatred.

"Watch it, Narcissa." Mrs. Tyler said quietly. "The only reason your husband's not in Azkaban is because certain individuals in the Ministry were too naive to see his true colours. Tread carefully, or you might find the rest of us taking more of an interest in his activities."

Luella's ears pricked up at the mention of the woman's name. This must be Narcissa Malfoy, Melissa Lovegood's estranged sister, renowned cat breeder and ornamental gardener, and wife of one-time suspected Death Eater and pillar of the magical community Lucius Malfoy. She'd heard her mentioned before by her friend Marlie Lovegood, Melissa Lovegood's daughter. And it had not been complimentary.

Narcissa sneered. "Well, let's hope you make a better Auror than you do a mother. Goodbye Caitlin. Give my regards to my darling sister, won't you?" And with that, she turned, walking towards an arrogant-looking blond wizard who Luella recognised as her husband Lucius, who she'd once seen a picture of, and a young boy who from the look of him must be their son.

Mrs. Tyler watched her go with a look of undisguised rage. "Oh, how I hate that family." she whispered quietly, shaking with fury.

"One day, Caitlin. One day." a woman's voice came from behind them. The three of them turned to see another blonde witch, looking very like Narcissa Malfoy, except without the permanent sneer. Not to mention the fact that she was dressed simply in a pinstripe trouser suit, with her short blonde hair pinned back out of her eyes, no make up and a pair of understated but expensive looking glasses. Walking down a busy street in Muggle London, she wouldn't have attracted a second glance. Luella had always thought of her as a younger, blonde version of her Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall.

Melissa Lovegood gazed at her sister with a strange look in her eyes. "Narcissa, Narcissa, why did you take up with him? You could have been so much more, you wanted to be Minister of Magic once!" She shook herself before patting Mrs. Tyler's shoulder. "One day, Caitlin, I promise you. We'll have enough evidence to get Malfoy in Azkaban where he belongs, and Narcissa will find out what it's like to raise a child on her own." She noticed a wide-eyed Deanna and Luella, and her expression relaxed. "Hello again. Looking forward to the new term?"

Deanna recovered herself. "Auntie Mel, who was that? Was that your sister?"

"Yes, she was. I hope you'll not judge the rest of the Harker family by her. The Lovegood branch have nothing to do with those Malfoys." She pronounced Malfoy as if it were an expletive.

They were joined by the rest of the Lovegood family at this point. Michael Lovegood, fifth year, Beater on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and Marlene, otherwise known as Marlie, third year and Slytherin Seeker. Once again, Luella couldn't get over how different Marlie was these days, how much the past two years and certain experiences in her first year had changed her. Gone was the nervousness, the insecurity, the pigtails and the desperate desire to be accepted that Luella had picked out when they'd first met in Diagon Alley two years ago. Marlie was now wearing her hair loose and it was flowing all the way down to her waist. Plus she appeared to have grown a foot in height. Perhaps the biggest change, however, was that Marlie was now grinning boldly, walking tall and ready to burst on to the scene like the celebrity Deanna had often commented that Marlie seemed to think she was.

"Hiya, you guys!" Marlie cried out. "All ready to rock Hogwarts for a third year of mischief and mayhem?"

"Too right, Lovegood!" Deanna grinned. "Just try not to get yourself poisoned this year, I'm not coming in to rescue you again."

Marlie just laughed, although the rest of her family looked rather less happy. Luella remembered the events to which Deanna was referring to well. Marlie had been slipped a dose of the lethal Sleeping Death potion which had sent her into a coma for the best part of her first year, and it had taken Deanna entering her dreams to give her a hand before she was able to wake up. All very well to laugh about it now, but it had caused untold grief at the time. Both Deanna and Marlie had nearly died.

Mrs. Lovegood swiftly changed the subject. "Caitlin, have you seen the Stormosis yet? I daresay your lot are looking forward to seeing them again; I know mine are."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Judging by the amount of red hair in that direction, I'd say that's them."

The four children peered over rather more critically. "Nah." Mike said at length. "That's the Weasley clan."

"Oh gods." Marlie groaned. "Well, let's keep quiet and leave them alone, I don't want Fred and George to notice me. Bane of my life, those two. Incidentally, Fred told me

their youngest boy Ron starts this year. Oh wonderful, another Weasley to annoy the hell out of me."

Deanna and Luella grinned. The Lovegoods and Weasleys were near neighbours down in Devon, and although their parents got on well enough, the respective children were rather less friendly. Marlie and the twins in particular enjoyed a love-hate relationship characterised by mutual taunting, and not helped by the fact they played on rival Quidditch teams.

"S'alright, Marls, we'll look after you." Deanna grinned. "Come on, Lu, let's find Ri, get the Gang of Four reconstituted. After me, fellow Slythies!" With that, she was off, Marlie in tow. Mike grinned and sauntered after them, his keen Beater eyes swiftly picking out the auburn haired Stormosi girls.

Luella ran after them, as the two mothers moved away to talk in private. Not looking where she was going, she ran straight into someone.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Sorry, I should have looked. Are you alright?"

She gave a hand to the boy she'd just knocked over. Small, he was, with glasses sellotaped together, clothes that didn't really fit him and untidy black hair. Luella immediately felt her heart go out to him. From the look of him, he could only be a first year and given the absence of family, a Muggle-born like her at that.

"I'm fine." he said nervously. His accent gave her few clues about him, but he sounded like he had the same middle-class Surrey background she did. Surprising, given that he looked like he was wearing hand-me-downs. In fact, she was sure she'd seen him somewhere before, but couldn't for the life of her remember where.

"You're a first year, aren't you?" Luella said kindly. "Here, let me give you a hand with that trunk. It must weigh a ton, I know mine does. *Wingardium Leviosa!*" She waved her wand, enjoying the feeling of being able to use magic again after a long summer holiday without it. The trunk immediately rose up and hovered a few feet in the air.

"There!" Luella said with satisfaction. "How's that?" The boy gasped in amazement.

"Oh my god!" he whispered. "How?"

Luella grinned. "Levitation Charm. First year magic so you'll be more than capable of that yourself this time next year. I'm Luella Martin, by the way. Third year witch, Slytherin, of Muggle parentage. What's your name?"

"Harry." the boy said quietly. He looked at Luella with a troubled expression. "Slytherin? But aren't Slytherins...?" He stopped talking, clearly unwilling to say anything else. Luella sighed. This was the usual reaction, but it didn't make things any easier.

"Untrustworthy, manipulative bastards? Yes, don't worry, I'm quite used to that reaction. Some of us are like that. But we're not all completely evil. We're ambitious,

but some of us have ethics. Take me for instance. All I'm really ambitious about at the moment is doing well at school. No idea how I ended up in Slytherin really, everyone keeps telling me I should have been in Ravenclaw. In fact, I tried manipulation once in my first year, and it went spectacularly wrong." She smiled warmly. Harry seemed to relax a little.

"What happened?" he asked curiously. "Did you not get what you wanted?"

Luella thought back. She'd got what she wanted alright, but it was the aftermath that had been the problem.

"Well, it worked. Then he found out about it, and I was in serious trouble. Anyway, I felt so bad about doing it, I gave up. Of course, it didn't help that it was my House Head that I tried to manipulate."

Harry was agog. "You tried to manipulate a teacher?"

"Yes. Bad idea. Very bad idea. Not to be copied. Especially not with Professor Snape. I mean, I had a very good reason, I might add, but it was not something I'll be doing again. I'm Honest Lu now."

Harry tried not to laugh. "Makes you sound like a used car dealer."

Luella burst out laughing. "It does, doesn't it! Ah well. As long as my friend Deanna doesn't hear about it, or I'll spend the rest of my schooldays getting teased about it. Mates, eh? Can't live with them, can't have a contract taken out on them. I was joking, by the way." she added hastily, seeing Harry's eyes widen in shock.

"Oh. Right." Harry seemed a little uncertain of how to react to that. He ran his fingers through his hair nervously. Luella couldn't help noticing a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.

"Where'd you get that?" she gasped, reaching out to touch it. Harry flinched and Luella withdrew her arm.

"Doesn't matter." he said quickly. Luella backed off. Despite her curiosity, she had no wish to pry.

"OK. Not my business after all. Anyway, I'd better go, my friends'll be wondering where I've got to. Bye, Harry. I expect I'll see you at Hogwarts soon. If you end up in Slytherin, find me, I'll help you settle in. If not, I'm sure we'll see each other around, you can still ask me for help if you need it." Again, the smile.

Harry nodded gratefully. "Bye, Luella. Erm, just one thing. How do I get this thing to stop floating when I'm on the train?" He indicated the trunk.

"Point your wand at it and say *Finite Incantatem*. Easy enough. If you put some power into it. Really want that spell to end." She glanced up and saw Deanna waving at her, with Marlie and Rianne Stormosi, her other friend, watching with raised eyebrows. She turned back to Harry. "I'd better be going. Those three will be making

all sorts of sly comments if I stand around here much longer. See you at Hogwarts!" And with that, she hurried off towards her friends.

Deanna greeted her with the sort of amusement she'd come to expect.

"Who was that, then, Lu? Your secret toyboy?"

Luella rolled her eyes. "As if. Just some first year I ran into. Looked a bit lost, so I thought I'd talk to him. Nice kid."

"What's his name?" Marlie asked, watching the boy trail off towards the Weasleys.

"Harry. Muggle-born. Future Slyth, you reckon?"

"Not if he's going to get ingratiated with the Weasleys." Rianne commented.
"Gryffindors one and all, that lot."

Marlie sniffed. "Poor boy, having to put up with Fred and George in his house. Mind you, I should talk, my cousin starts this year. I bet he's in bloody Slytherin. What a pain in the arse, having to have him hanging around. I just hope he doesn't take after his parents, that's all I can say. Let's get on board, get a carriage to ourselves." With that, Marlie led the way onto the Hogwarts Express.

Harry Potter watched Luella go with surprise. She seemed nice enough. He cast his mind back to everything he'd heard about Slytherin House, that there wasn't a single Dark mage who hadn't been one. Hard to reconcile that image with Luella Martin. Someone less likely to be a Dark witch he'd be hard pressed to find. Compared with the only other Slytherin he'd ever met, Luella seemed positively heavenly. Mind you, that other Slytherin had killed his parents and tried to kill him, giving him the scar Luella had noticed. He rubbed it. Strange, that she hadn't appeared to recognise it. He'd been told it would mark him out as famous Harry Potter who defeated the evil Lord Voldemort. Yet the first witch to see it hadn't got a clue how he'd come by it. This, Harry thought, was a good thing. He decided he liked Luella. Maybe Slytherin House wasn't so bad after all. He still would rather not be one though. Dragging his trunk behind him, a job made much easier by Luella's Charm, he wandered off in search of an empty carriage.

Melissa Lovegood and Caitlin Tyler had by this time caught up with their offspring.

"Now you will take care won't you?" Mrs. Lovegood warned her children. "I don't want any owls saying you've been set upon by your fellow students again."

"Oh, as if!" Marlie grinned. "Come on, I'm the best Seeker Slytherin have had in years. They're not going to poison me again, are they?"

"I'd be more concerned about what these four might be up to next." Mrs. Tyler commented wryly. "Listen here, you four, if I hear that you've put so much as a toe out of line, there will be trouble. Especially you, Deanna."

Deanna feigned shock. "Mother! Are you accusing me of misbehaviour?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. Just stating that if I hear about any crazy schemes or bizarre pranks that can be traced back to you, you will be seriously in for it, my girl."

"As if I'd do anything like that. Mum, you disappoint me."

Mrs. Tyler gave her daughter a knowing look. "Hmm. Well let's keep it that way, shall we? Alright, come and give your mother a kiss." Deanna did so, reluctantly.

With all the goodbyes out of the way, and everyone settled on board the train, the two mothers stepped back and walked away. After three times seeing their children off, neither felt the need to wave to them until the train left any more. Melissa in particular felt no real concern about any of them. They'll be fine, she told herself. They're quite capable of looking after themselves now.

She glanced at Caitlin, who was gazing up the platform. At the end of the train, the small boy who Luella had been talking to earlier was having his trunk heaved on board the train by two red-haired boys who could only be the Weasley twins. Caitlin watched them, a strange look in her eyes as she gazed at the first year.

"Caitlin." Melissa said gently. "Leave him."

Caitlin started at the mention of her own name. Her eyes did not leave the young Harry Potter though.

"Look at him, Mel." she said quietly. "So like James. And he's got his mother's eyes, did you notice that?" She held her head in her hands. "I miss them both so much, Mel."

Melissa comforted her friend. "I know, Caitlin. I know. But there's nothing you can do for Harry now. He's living with his aunt and uncle. Not your responsibility any more."

Caitlin shook her head fiercely. "He shouldn't be with them. I'm his godmother, he should have come to me. What was Dumbledore thinking of?" She turned to Melissa, furious. "You don't live in the same town, Mel! You've never crept near their house to spy on them! You've not seen the way they treat him. They make him do the chores, they made him sleep under the stairs, they spoil their own son rotten but never even bother celebrating Harry's birthday. Did you know they didn't even tell him about being a wizard until the Hogwarts letter came?" She was rocking backwards and forwards on her heels with fury. "The number of times I've thought of Apparating into their front room one evening and demanding to know what they think they're doing to him, I've lost count of. I dream of one day walking into their house and taking Harry away from them for good. He's my godson, Mel!" Caitlin's voice rose, fire in her eyes. "Lily was my best friend, my very best friend! She and James made me and..." She

paused, a look of pain shooting across her face. "They made me guardian if anything should happen to them." she said quietly. "He should have come to live with me."

Melissa gently hugged her friend. "Caitlin. You already had one young child to manage on your own. And you only just coped with that. You couldn't have managed Harry as well. And you're not his blood relative. The Sanguinis Charm couldn't have protected him with you. It's for the best that he lives with the Dursleys."

Caitlin was sceptical. "If you say so, Mel. But it's not right, the way they treat him. And you never really knew Petunia Evans. She was a jealous, spiteful child and she's not improved with age. She makes your sister look like Luella."

Melissa laughed hollowly. "I doubt that. Although I must say, she's got worse since marrying Lucius, and I do sometimes wonder..." She brushed her worries aside, before discreetly casting a Secrecy Charm around them so no one would be able to eavesdrop. "Never mind. Caitlin, we need to talk."

"What about?" Caitlin sighed. Melissa had assumed her Head of Department voice, so this was clearly about something other than the godson she'd been denied. However, she was proved wrong almost immediately.

"Harry, of course." Melissa said, a wry grin on her face. "Did you see him talking to Luella?"

"I did. Why?"

"Interesting that one who will defeat the Dark Lord and one who already has should meet up so soon and get on so well. And that they both grew up in the same town, went to the same school."

"What are you getting at, Mel?" Caitlin said, warily.

"The Redemption Prophecy, of course." Melissa lowered her voice. "Two Muggle-born Slytherins, born fifty years apart, a thousand years after Slytherin's downfall. One will expose our darkness for the world to see. The other will eradicate it and bring peace by defeating the older one. And she will be assisted by a Gryffindor wizard who is a child of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Think, Caitlin! We know who the two Slytherins are, but not the Gryffindor. At least, not until now." She smiled craftily.

Caitlin's eyes widened. "You don't mean...?"

"Of course. James Potter a Gryffindor, Lily Evans a Slytherin. And he's already brought down Voldemort once. Why not again? If it comes to that, of course."

"Jumping the gun a little, aren't you Mel? The boy hasn't even been Sorted yet. He might end up a Hufflepuff for all you know."

"The same was said of Luella. She ended up in the house we expected. And if Harry is anything like James, then he too will be a Gryffindor."

Caitlin sighed. Melissa was, in all probability, right. She'd observed Harry carefully growing up, and after all he'd suffered, to still be a nice, polite young boy, he couldn't really be anything but a Gryffindor.

"All right. So what do we do?" Caitlin was nothing if not practical. Melissa shrugged. "Us? Nothing. Let him get on with his life. Make friends, grow up, learn how to be a wizard. We do the same as we did with Luella, watch, protect, give him space to grow. And hope the two of them become allies in the future."

"And who's going to be doing the watching?" Caitlin asked hopefully.

"Not you, for a start. I'm sorry, Caitlin," Melissa said as Caitlin cried out in protest, "but you're too emotionally involved. He is well protected by the Sanguinis Charm with the Dursleys. And as for his time at school, I've asked Severus to keep an eye on him."

Caitlin protested even more at this. "Severus?? Mel, you can't be serious! He hated James. With a passion. Not quite as much as he hated Sirius, but still pretty badly. How on earth you expect him to give an impartial, fair account of Harry's progress is beyond me."

Melissa pretended surprise. "Caitlin! I thought you liked him. He certainly likes you."

Caitlin went red and swiftly changed the subject. "You leave me out of this. Severus and I are just friends, although if he mistreats my godson, that will change."

"What, you mean if he's horrible to Harry, you'll shag him? I'll tell him that, he will be pleased." Melissa grinned.

"Mel!" Caitlin nearly shrieked. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh, as if I'd tell him to mistreat Harry Potter, Caitlin." Melissa laughed. "But seriously. I think he's a good choice. He might not like Harry much. But he will do what's asked of him, and believe it or not, he is capable of being objective when he has to. Sometimes. If he's in a good mood. At least he will not spare me any less than pleasant details, although I may have to work hard to get anything nice out of him. Which is where you come in."

"I'm honoured." Caitlin said dryly. "And where do I fit into this?"

"Well, it is a well-documented fact that Severus Snape has something of a soft spot for you."

"And? I hope you're not expecting me to embark on a torrid affair with him. Deanna would not be happy." Caitlin looked disapproving.

"Relax." Melissa said casually. "I'm expecting nothing of the sort. Whether you sleep with him or not is entirely your choice. All I ask is that you meet up with him on occasion and ask him about Harry in person. Caitlin, if anyone can get an accurate answer on Harry's wellbeing out of him, it's you."

"How often is on occasion?" Caitlin asked warily.

"Not often. Once or twice a year. More often if a crisis erupts, obviously. Also, given the current situation with the Stone, it's a good idea for the two of you to work together in protecting Luella anyway. I doubt she's in any immediate danger, but I'm taking no chances. Keep each other informed and updated, alright?"

"Mel, do I have any choice in the matter at all?"

"Nope. As the two mages most responsible for Luella's wellbeing, I want you two communicating. You don't have to like him! Just be civil."

Caitlin sighed. Her last conversation with Severus Snape had ended in a heated argument verging on violence. But on the other hand, she had to admit she did want to see him again. And maybe if they concentrated just on professional matters...

"Go on then." she heard herself sighing. Melissa patted her on the back warmly.

"Excellent, I knew you'd see sense. Come on, let's get to the office. Carmela Lynch is reporting back on the Gringotts robbery. I want to know what we've managed to find out about it."

"Is it true that Voldemort may have been behind it?" Caitlin asked quietly.

"It's a possibility. Certainly my sources say he's not where we thought he was. I believe he may have recruited someone to assist him, maybe a former Death Eater. And let's face it, going for the only known Philosopher's Stone in existence would be a smart next move. Good thing we had it moved when we did."

"A good thing indeed." Caitlin went pale. "But Mel, it's been moved to the same place as Lu and Harry! What if they attempt a raid there! Why not take the opportunity to eliminate them as well?"

"All the more reason to keep watch on the place. Dumbledore has put good safeguards around the Stone, and I've no doubt he's watching Harry too. As for Lu, she's unknown as yet. They won't go for her. However, we need to make doubly sure that all is well there. Another reason for you to see Severus in person. I want to make sure that the situation is closely monitored. I very much doubt it will be an open attack, the Dark Lord is not that strong. I doubt Luella and Harry will come to any harm just yet. But I'm taking no chances. I want to know who's helping You-Know-Who." She looked grim.

Caitlin suddenly began to have a very bad feeling. "Mel, you said it might be a former Death Eater. You don't think it might be..."

"Severus?" Melissa laughed. "No, Caitlin, I don't think so. Not him. Rest assured, Caitlin, your boyfriend is quite innocent."

"Mel Lovegood, he is not my boyfriend!" Caitlin snapped. "We are just friends! And that is all."

"Whatever you say, Caitlin." Melissa smirked. The two witches continued to argue the point even as they Disappeared.

Chapter Two Duelling on the Hogwarts Express

Much later that day, the Hogwarts Express was travelling through the Scottish countryside, approaching its destination. Luella Martin was gazing out of the window. For someone used to the green fields of Surrey and the gentle, rolling hills that were the North Downs, the mountains of Scotland covered in an unending forest of pine trees with mist hiding their peaks were a sight that never failed to impress.

"So beautiful." Luella whispered. "I love Scotland, don't you, Deanna?"

"Nice enough. Bloody cold, though. I bet Wales is better."

"You moved to Surrey when you were three! How would you know?" Rianne snapped from the corner of the compartment. She was already going through one of her textbooks, twirling a strand of reddish-brown hair idly in her fingers. Rianne was a tall, thin girl with brown eyes, freckles and the sort of studious expression that made her look as if she should be wearing glasses (even though she didn't need them).

"Alright then, o Cymraegish one." Deanna said. "Is Wales better than Scotland?"

Rianne glanced lazily out of the window. "Tyler, you already know what I'm going to tell you. Of course Wales is better. Give me Yr Wyddfa any day. That's Snowdon to you two." she said, a slightly patronising expression on her face.

"I know what Yr Wyddfa is, you patronising Caernarfonshire git." Deanna snapped. Rianne snatched up her schoolbag.

"Oooh! Touchy! And I'm from Aberystwyth, not Caernarfon, get it right." she sneered at her. Deanna just snorted and returned to examining the view.

At that point, Marlie burst in with a repulsed look on her face. "Don't go out there!" she said dramatically. "You won't believe what Lee Jordan's got hold of!"

The other three looked at each other wearily. Lee Jordan was a friend of the infamous Weasley twins and as such, could have anything.

"Go on then. Tell us." Deanna sighed.

"He's only gone and got a giant bloody tarantula!" Marlie said, seething. "And those bloody Weasley twins were trying to set it on me!"

The girls grinned. "And what did you do to it?" Luella said. Marlie hated creepy-crawlies, but had got a lot braver about them since her Sleeping Death trance.

Marlie gave a sly grin. "Put it this way. You know spiders are supposed to have thirty three eyes? It's now got only thirty. I used the Conjunctivitis Curse on it."

Deanna grinned. "Cool! Are the Weasleys and Lee Jordan happy with you for that?"

"Er... they weren't pleased. Told me to watch out or they'd set the Slytherin Serpent on me. But never mind them. Have you heard the rumours flying around this train?"

They shook their heads. "What rumours?" Rianne asked.

Marlie sat down, with the attitude of one about to indulge in a good old fashioned gossip.

"We have a celebrity in our midst." she said slyly.

"What?" "You're joking!" "Who?"

"Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. Starting Hogwarts this year. He's on the train! With us! Isn't that cool?"

"Harry Potter!" gasped Deanna. "You're kidding! Where? Let's go and see him!" She got up and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute!" Rianne snapped. "Leave the poor boy alone. I'm sure he doesn't want the entire school trooping in like he's some kind of exhibit."

Luella looked confused. Harry Potter? The one who defeated Voldemort? Starting Hogwarts now?

"But how can he be at Hogwarts? He defeated Voldemort, he must be a grown man by now surely?" she said puzzled. The other three burst out laughing.

"Lu, don't you know the story?" Marlie laughed.

"Er... he defeated Voldemort ten years ago. That's all I know."

Rianne was looking at Deanna. "Don't tell me you didn't tell her! You're meant to be her best friend!"

"Yeah? And how often does Lord Voldemort crop up in your everyday conversations, Ri? Yeah, thought so." Deanna turned back to Luella. "Lu, he was only a baby at the time. That's why he's so special. Voldy turned up at his house, killed his parents, went for him, but it didn't work. Curse bounced off Harry, hit Voldy and he snuffed it. House reduced to ruins, Voldemort's followers scattered like flies, Voldy himself bit the dust, and little Harry Potter's left unscathed. Well, almost. He was left with a scar on his forehead shaped like a bolt of lightning. Got sent to live with Muggle relatives of his afterwards. He was only a year old at the time, poor kid. That was ten years ago, he's now eleven and starting Hogwarts. Wow, we're going to be at school with him! Reckon he'll end up in Slytherin?" Deanna seemed fascinated.

Luella wasn't paying attention. Her thoughts had raced back to the boy she'd met at King's Cross. With a lightning shaped scar on his forehead.

"Oh my god, that was Harry Potter?" she gasped. The other three turned to look at her.

"You met him?" Marlie asked, openmouthed.

Luella nodded. "Yeah. He was that first year kid I ran into. No wonder he was so shy and quiet! He must have been terrified I was going to mob him. And no wonder he wouldn't tell me how he got his scar."

Deanna wasn't listening. "You met Harry Potter? You actually MET Harry Potter? And you didn't get his autograph? Aaargh!" She seemed highly disappointed. Luella knew that Deanna loved hearing about tales of famous Aurors and other Dark Fighters. She must have heard Harry's story from a young age and been dying to meet him.

"Sorry." she mumbled. "I'd have asked him if I'd known."

"What's he like?" Marlie asked, fascinated. "Is he cute? Does he like blondes?"

"I don't know! I only spoke to him for five minutes. And Marlie, he's eleven. Not likely to be interested in girls yet."

Marlie got up, unruffled. "Well, I don't care. I'm going to see him for myself. I'm not passing up an opportunity to meet the world famous Harry Potter!"

"I'm coming with you!" Deanna said.

Rianne stared at them both. "You two! Leave the poor kid alone, he's probably had half the train trooping in to see him. He's probably had more than enough. Lu, tell them."

"Ri's right, leave him alone, I'm sure he doesn't want to be besieged by fans." Luella said.

Deanna and Marlie ignored them both and headed out. Rianne and Luella looked at each other, sighed and followed them.

Marlie led the way down the train towards the end compartment where Harry was rumoured to be. As they approached it, voices drifted out towards them. A rather posh sounding boy's voice was speaking.

"You'll soon find out some magical families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there." Luella was reminded suddenly of Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry's voice was heard in reply. "I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks."

The first boy's voice was heard speaking again, sounding a lot less friendly this time. No doubt about, he sounded just like Narcissa Malfoy.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter. Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them either. You hang around with riff-raff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid and it'll rub off on you."

There was silence from the compartment. Deanna and Marlie looked at each other, nodded and drew their wands. Marlie kicked the door open and strode in.

"Greetings, children." she trilled. "Is it me, or do I detect a fight brewing? If so, please don't start without me, it's been ages since I had a good battle. Isn't it, DT?"

Deanna slinked in after her. "Too right, Marlie, I've been spoiling for a duel for a while now." Luella, standing behind them, peered over their shoulders.

There were five boys in the carriage. One was Harry, wand at the ready. Next to him was a red haired boy who looked like a taller, thinner version of the Weasley twins. Between those two and Deanna and Marlie were three other boys. In the middle was a slightly built blond boy who looked stunningly similar to Marlie. Luella realised with a shock that this must be her Malfoy cousin. Either side of him were two much bigger boys who also seemed familiar, although Luella couldn't think where she'd seen them.

The blond boy took in the four girls standing there in their Hogwarts robes. He glanced at the sashes and smiled.

"Ah, reinforcements. Fancy demonstrating what les Verts-et-Argents are capable of?"

"Don't tempt me." snarled Deanna. She looked contemptuously at his black sash. "And I'd thank you not to use that name until you're one of us. If you're one of us." she sneered at him.

"Of course I'll be one of you. I'm a Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." Draco had a strange expression on his face, a mixture of confusion and anger. Marlie made a strange noise that expressed anger and surprise. Coolly, she stepped forward.

"So you're my cousin Draco. I must say, I'd expected you to be taller. My brother was much bigger than you at that age. Obviously that inferior Malfoy blood interfering with the Harker genes."

Draco's expression turned to pure anger. "Size isn't everything. If you're one of my country bumpkin Lovegood cousins, then you've no right to criticise my genetic stock. At least my family isn't riddled with Muggle blood." He produced his wand threateningly. Deanna was ready.

"Don't threaten an Auror's child again, Malfoy. Not good for the old life-expectancy. Expelliarmus!" The wands of Draco Malfoy and his two friends went flying out of their hands. Marlie caught them. "Nice one, Tyler!" she laughed.

Draco and his friends went quiet at the mention of Deanna's surname. "Caitlin Tyler's daughter?" one said quietly.

"That's me." Deanna said carelessly. "Fastest draw in the school."

"We've heard about you." the other one said gruffly. "Lots about you. You want to watch yourself, you've got quite a few enemies out there."

"Thanks for the warning." Deanna said casually. "Now get out before I take you up on your offer to demonstrate real Slytherin power."

Draco motioned to his friends. The three of them slipped past the girls, pausing only to take their wands back. Luella watched them go nervously before stepping into the compartment after the others.

Marlie surveyed the other two boys. "Are you two alright?" They both nodded. Marlie turned her attention to the red haired boy.

"Sorry about him, Ron. That particular branch of our family should have been pruned a long time ago. I'm hoping he doesn't end up in Slytherin, but I fear it will be otherwise."

"You know him?" Deanna asked, mildly surprised.

"Ron Weasley." Marlie explained. "I don't think I need say any more." She turned to the other boy and went quiet.

"So you're Harry Potter." she said softly. "I must say, I'd thought you'd be, well, taller. Marlie Lovegood, by the way. Ron's neighbour. Third year. Slytherin Seeker. Unfortunately related to that trash Malfoy. This is Deanna Tyler, that's Rianne Stormosi and this is Luella Martin, but I gather you've already met her."

"Hi, Harry." Luella said, smiling. "You never told me you were Harry Potter!"

Harry blushed. "You never asked." he said quietly.

Deanna was studying him carefully, thinking hard. "I know you, don't I? I'm sure I've seen you before. Where are you from?"

"Little Whinging, Surrey." Harry said cautiously. "It's just outside..."

"...Kingston-upon-Thames?" Deanna grinned. "Know it well, mate. Grew up in that hell-hole myself. I mean, Kingston itself is alright, but the particular suburb I have to live in is the absolute pits. Only decent thing about it is a fast bus route into town. Such a dull little place, the motto on the coat of arms is "There's always Kingston". Wait a second, if you're from the same town as me and Luella, that must mean..."

Luella suddenly realised where she'd seen Harry before. "You went to our school! I recognise you! You were always getting picked on by that fat kid, what's his name?"

"Dudley Dursley. My cousin." Harry said.

Deanna snapped her fingers as it all came flooding back to her. "Gods, yes, Dudley Dursley, what a moron. Tried to pick on us too, except we were both faster than the fat pillock. And we fought back. Lu, do you remember that time he was trying to get our lunch money, and he suddenly ended up flying backwards into the long jump pit?"

Luella laughed. "Flew right across the playground, taking half the third year with him. Teachers never did work out how we'd managed it. My parents hit the roof. Vernon Dursley's one of my dad's clients, we nearly lost a lot of business because of that. Good thing you took the rap, really. Mind you, he didn't pick on us again, did he?"

Deanna shook her head laughing. Harry and Ron were grinning themselves, although Ron was trying to hide it. Marlie was trying to picture the thought of a fat kid careering across a crowded playground, while Rianne was trying to look disapproving, without success.

Deanna controlled her laughter and looked sadly at Harry. "Harry, can you ever forgive me?"

"What for?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Not recognising you!" Deanna said softly. "Great Mother, if I'd known you were Harry Potter! Why my mum never told me, I don't know. I even saw you in Kingston town centre once with your Muggle relatives and FBD. Mum was with me, and she kept looking at you really strangely, sort of like she was upset and angry and couldn't do anything. Now I know why. She knew who you were! Harry, I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I'd have befriended you, protected you from FBD, that sort of thing." Deanna said regretfully.

"FBD?" Ron, Marlie and Rianne asked in unison.

"Fat Bastard Dursley." Luella replied. "It was what we used to call him. Hey, it made us laugh."

Harry burst out laughing. The thought of his cousin being referred to as FBD behind his back was the funniest thing he'd heard in ages. All of a sudden, Dudley Dursley seemed far less terrifying. He recalled the time when Dudley had been flung across the playground. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had been furious, particularly at the fact that a couple of girls had been responsible. Uncle Vernon had called them both common gypsy hoydens. Harry had thought at the time that he wouldn't mind being a gypsy if it meant being able to do that to his cousin. And it was these two sitting in front of him. He warmed to them even more now he knew that. He thought Luella had seemed familiar before. Now he knew why.

At that moment, a voice was heard announcing the imminent arrival of the train at Hogsmeade station. Rianne got up.

"Come on, you three, we'd better go. Make sure we've got everything. Harry, Ron, nice to meet you, I daresay we'll see you around. Maybe even in Slytherin."

The four Slytherins left the compartment, shouting goodbyes to Ron and Harry. Harry waved good bye, smiling to himself. Ron looked rather less impressed.

"Who were they trying to impress? We could have handled Malfoy by ourselves." Ron said indignantly.

"Yeah, but they know more magic than us." Harry pointed out. "Did you know how to get their wands off them like Deanna did?"

"That's not the point." Ron muttered darkly. "They're Slytherins."

"Seemed nice enough to me." Harry said calmly. "They saved us from getting beaten up, and they've sent my cousin Dudley flying across a crowded playground into a long jump pit. Pretty impressive."

"They're still Slytherins." Ron said obstinately. "And Marlie Lovegood's trouble. The amount of times she's landed Fred and George right in it. She's as manipulative as they come and she's Malfoy's cousin. Her only redeeming feature is that she's a Chudley Cannons fan. Don't trust her."

"We can't pick our relatives, Ron." Harry said absently. "Look what I've got for a cousin, he's almost as bad as Malfoy. And from what I've heard about your brothers, I doubt they needed any help from her to get themselves in trouble."

"Harry, are you listening to me?" Ron almost yelled. "They're Slytherins! The Enemy! You don't hang around with or get friendly with Slytherins, no matter how nice they seem. They are all devious, untrustworthy gits! Come on, we're here. Let's go. Forget about them. They might be Slytherins, but so will Malfoy be. You don't want to be in the same house as him, do you?" He got up and headed for the door. Harry followed, his head spinning. How could four girls like that have ended up in the evil house? It didn't make sense. And they'd gone after Malfoy, a potential future housemate. Slytherin was obviously a much more complex house than he'd first imagined. Ron did have one good point though. If it was Malfoy's likely destination, it probably wasn't a good place to be.

The four Slytherins picked their way through the throng of students on their way to the Slytherin table. The ceiling was now dark, and the stars glimmered down on them.

Deanna took a seat midway up the table, with Luella next to her. Marlie and Rianne settled opposite.

"Nice to be back, isn't it?" Rianne sighed. "I tell you, I've missed this place." She looked nostalgically around, her eyes sweeping across the teachers' table for the briefest of instants. The other three grinned at each other. It was an open secret that Rianne had something of a crush on their House Master and Potions teacher, Professor Snape. The man in question was seated next to Professor Quirrell, their Defence Against the Dark Arts who was wearing a large purple turban. Snape, wearing his usual black robes, looked as arrogant as he usually did. He swept his eyes

lazily across the Slytherin table. As his gaze travelled over the Slytherin girls, he paused briefly and gave them a half-smile before looking away again. Luella smiled. Events during their first year and their continued success for Slytherin ever since meant that Snape regarded them rather more highly than most of his other students. Certainly he was less vindictive towards them. Deanna in particular he seemed to like, much to Deanna's disgust. Deanna had little respect for any teachers but disliked Snape most of all.

Marlie's thoughts were on the forthcoming Sorting. "I wonder who we're going to get this year. I hope Malfoy and those thuggish mates of his don't end up in Slytherin. Fancy having that lot in our house. I'd rather be in Hufflepuff than in a house with those three."

"Not much chance of that - Mum reckons the Malfoys have been Slytherins for generations." Deanna said. "So have the Harkers, so he's Slyth on both sides. Sorry, Marlie."

Marlie groaned. Rianne comforted her. "Never mind, Marlie. How much trouble could he be? I mean, we're third years. He's just a firstie. You're our star Quidditch player. My older sister is favourite to be Head Girl this year, and your brother's tipped to be a Prefect. Come on, you'll be fine. We'll look after you."

"Thanks, Ri." Marlie smiled. "At least I'm immune to Sleeping Death now."

Luella found her eyes returning to the teachers' table again. Something wasn't quite right. For no reason, she felt profoundly uneasy. She glanced swiftly at Snape. He was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Nothing worrying there. She shot a glance at Professor Quirrell on Snape's other side.

The fear hit her suddenly. Clutching at her insides, pricking and poking at her brain. She seemed to hear a voice in her mind hissing Beware, beware at her, and a sense of a dark shadow somewhere behind her, just out of the corner of her eye, wanting nothing less than her heart, soul and very life. A dark power, draining her energy and her will slowly away towards itself...

"Luella? Lu? Are you OK?" Deanna was shaking her arm. Luella started. She looked at herself and realised she was sweating all over and trembling.

Deanna was looking at her in concern. "Lu, what is it? You look awful. Are you alright?"

Luella held herself, worried. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"That... fear. I don't know what it was. Just seemed to come out of nowhere. Like there was this shadow just trying to drain me. God, it was horrible." She shivered nervously.

"Lu, it's alright." Deanna said soothingly. "You're safe. No one's going to attack you here, not with Dumbledore and all the teachers watching."

Luella shook her head. "I don't know. I just... don't feel safe. I mean, it's gone now, but I still feel like I'm being watched."

"Well, you're not." Deanna said firmly. "No one's looking at you, they're all looking at their watches and waiting for the Sorting to start. And talking of which..."

The lights in the Great Hall dimmed. Now only the table lamps gleamed in the darkness. A hush fell over the Hall as the doors opened and Professor McGonagall led the first years in.

Luella watched as they passed the Slytherin table. Draco was there, looking his usual arrogant self. Harry, in between Ron Weasley and another boy, looked petrified. Luella gave him a smile of encouragement but he didn't see her. She remembered her own Sorting. She too had been terrified, more so than most. After all, her eventual House would determine whether she'd have a quiet life or have to take on Lord Voldemort. Unluckily, she'd been landed with the destiny of fighting the Dark Lord. Not appealing, but so far, being Slytherin Redeemer had made very little appreciable difference to her life.

The first years lined up in front of the teachers' table and the Sorting began. Luella, however, paid little attention. She was still puzzling over why she'd suddenly felt so afraid. After all, what was there to be frightened of? Snape was there, Dumbledore was there, it was a familiar enough setting. So where had it come from? She looked back at Professor Quirrell, barely visible in the half-light. No fear this time, but a growing sense of unease. Something is not right, she thought, alarmed. Not right at all.

The rest of the school started applauding. Realising with a start that the Sorting Hat had finished its song, Luella hastily joined in. She settled herself expectantly as the Sorting proper began. Hufflepuff got the first few Sortees, but Bulstrode, Millicent became the first new Slytherin. Luella clapped politely enough but couldn't help thinking that she didn't look promising. A few more Sortings, then a name was read out that made all four girls' blood run cold. "Crabbe, Vincent!" McGonagall called out.

"Crabbe, did she say?" Rianne hissed. Luella watched with horror as one of Draco's friends stepped forward. Now she knew where she'd seen him before. His brother had once been a Hogwarts student, but had been expelled during their first year. And they'd had a hand in it. No wonder the younger Crabbe had been so interested in Deanna.

Deanna was pale with shock. "Oh gods, I didn't realise he'd have a brother." she whispered. "What do I do, folks? I bet that other mate of Malfoy's is Marcus Goyle's brother. They're going to hate me!"

"There's three of them and four of us. You're the best dueller in school and Lu's best at magic. And me and Ri have influential siblings. Don't worry." Marlie whispered.

Crabbe was duly sorted into Slytherin and sat at the far end of the table. He scanned the rows of students and soon picked out Deanna. She met his gaze coldly. He just grinned evilly at her and turned to watch the Sorting. More names were called, and "Goyle, Gregory" came all too quickly. He too ended up in Slytherin and joined his friend. He too gave Deanna the same evil grin. Deanna shuddered nervously.

Eventually "Malfoy, Draco" was called. The Hat wasted little time with him, screaming "Slytherin!" as soon as it touched his head. He swaggered over to Crabbe and Goyle, grinning smugly and shooting a nasty grin at Marlie and Deanna, who both shook their heads sorrowfully.

"Could it get much worse?" Deanna asked theatrically. "All I need now is for Clarissa Parkinson's younger sib to join us and that'll just put the icing on the cake!" Sure enough, Parkinson, Pansy was Sorted into Slytherin and sat with Millicent Bulstrode, not far from Draco. She gave Deanna a look of pure hatred then turned away. Deanna sighed.

"What goes around comes around, I guess. This is not going to be my year, is it?"

Rianne was philosophical. "Life's a bitch, Deanna, and all good things must be paid for. I guess this is your karma for being such a hero during your first year."

"Tell me about it." Deanna muttered darkly. Marlie motioned for quiet.

"Never mind them! It's Harry Potter's turn!"

They fell silent. McGonagall called out "Potter, Harry!" All down the hall, whispers broke out. On her other side, Luella heard Summer Montague whispering to Laetitia Vetinari "What, the Harry Potter? Really?" and Laetitia replying "Do your maths, Summer! He's eleven this year, isn't he?"

Luella watched Harry walk to the Hat. Poor thing, he looks awful, she thought. She watched with bated breath as he sat down and pulled the Hat on. Seconds ticked by. The air was alive with tension. Suddenly, the Hat sang out "Gryffindor!"

The Gryffindor table erupted with applause. Harry took the Hat off, his face flushed with pride. He walked off towards them, shaking, but happy, and allowed his fellow Gryffindors to mob him.

Luella felt a wave of disappointment. She liked young Harry. And now he was a Gryffindor and rival. Ah well. Not the end of the world. Just disappointing. She'd been looking forward to helping him settle in.

The Slytherin table seemed rather flat, as all around, people were muttering about how Potter should have been theirs. Laetitia was heard exclaiming "Well, if he's a Gryffindor, then so be it. But I think it's such a waste for one so talented not to end up here." Summer and Kat Stormosi were concurring.

The Sorting was nearly at an end now. Ron Weasley was Sorted into Gryffindor, as expected, and Blaise Zabini wound up in Slytherin, before the lights came back on,

and the Hat was taken away for another year. Now came the next ceremony of the evening as the new Prefects and Head Students were announced.

Each House Head took it in turn to read out the names of the new Prefects from their house. Gryffindor were first, and Luella noted that Percy Weasley was among those presented with a Prefect badge. Bet Fred and George'll love that, she grinned. Percy was known to be a stickler for rules, completely the opposite of his fun-loving younger brothers.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were next, then it was Slytherin's turn. Luella felt the entire table go still and quiet as Professor Snape read out the names. Most she didn't really know that well, but she felt a thrill of excitement go through her as Mike Lovegood was among those called out. Across the table, Marlie bounced up and down, shouting "Go, Mikey!" Luella smiled. Having another friend with a Prefect as older sibling was a good thing no matter how you looked at it. Especially when said older sibling was known to be very protective of his sister's wellbeing. She glanced at Deanna, who was also grinning.

"See that, Lu!" she hissed with delight. "Malfoy won't dare to pick on us with Mike around!"

Laetitia Vetinari was also picked as a Prefect, to no one's surprise, and Snape returned to the teachers' table. The Hall went dim again, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet. He produced a chest and opened it in silence to reveal a goblet, blazing with magical fire. The Headmaster began to speak.

"Ever since the Founding, this ceremony was performed at the opening of each session to choose from among the student body those most suited to leading it that year. To ensure that the choice is made impartially, we use this magical artefact, the Goblet of Fire. The names of all our seventh year Prefects are placed in it, and it chooses from among them the boy and girl best fit to lead you. It is nearly ready to make it's choice, I believe."

Everyone waited in silence. This ceremony was, if anything, more daunting than the Sorting. At length, the Goblet threw out a piece of parchment. Dumbledore caught it expertly and read out the name of a stunned Hufflepuff boy who had to be prodded by his friends into going up to collect his badge. Now it was the Head Girl's turn. The room went quiet. Time seemed to stand still on the Slytherin table. Debra Stormosi was tipped to be favourite, but would the Goblet agree?

The Goblet shot out it's answer. Dumbledore caught it and cleared his throat. "From Slytherin House, Debra Stormosi."

The Slytherins cheered. Kat was clearly seen hugging Mike and screaming "That's my sister!" Rianne was doing likewise to Marlie. Up and down the table, Slytherins were giving Debra a standing ovation as she went to collect her badge from Dumbledore. Luella shot a look at Professor Snape who seemed pretty pleased. Next to her, Deanna's grin had just got even bigger.

"Well, this year at least, we're set! Marlie's brother a Prefect, Rianne's sister Head Girl. Lu, this is brilliant!" Deanna smiled. "Ah, Malfoy, you'll have your work cut out for you getting revenge on me now!"

Luella grinned as the feast got underway. True, they'd missed out on Harry Potter, and got landed with Draco Malfoy. But on the other hand, they now had influence in all the right places. And for a Slytherin, that was just about perfect.

Chapter Three Desire Unfulfilled

Caitlin waited nervously in the Three Broomsticks, toying with her wine glass. Her first meeting with Severus in over a year. She wasn't at all sure how this was going to go. She just hoped they didn't end up threatening each other like the last time.

The door was flung open, causing quite a few customers to look up. However, on seeing who had just walked in, in a foul mood even by his standards, they returned to their drinks muttering "Oh. It's him." While Snape did not make a habit of visiting Hogsmeade, his reputation had preceded him. Storming over to the bar, he ordered a double brandy, knocked it back in one, ordered another and scanned the room.

Caitlin allowed a look of wry amusement to cross her face. Severus looked less than happy. This could be an interesting meeting. However, she liked her men and her assignments challenging. Snape's expression lightened a little as he joined her.

"Well, thank Hades I'm seeing you today, Caitlin." he snapped. "Your owl was the only good thing to happen this week."

"I'm sure that's not true, Sevi." she countered. "Haven't we got ourselves a Slytherin Head Girl, after all?"

"Deanna told you all about that, did she?" Snape said carelessly. "Well, really, who didn't think Debra was going to be chosen? That badge has been waiting for her since she started Hogwarts. That is far outweighed by the new student intake."

Caitlin steadied herself for a Severus Snape rant. "Are you referring to our little superstar Harry?" she grinned.

"Who else? I tell you, Caitlin..." He took a sip of his drink and a few deep breaths to calm himself. "Have you seen him?"

"Briefly, at King's Cross. Why?"

Snape gazed at Caitlin, his eyes betraying anger, pain and fear. "He's so like him, Caitlin. So like Potter Senior. But his eyes..." He took another sip. "I made eye contact with him at the feast. It was like looking straight into the past. He's got her eyes, Caitlin!" He buried his face in his hands. "How the hell am I going to teach him when every time I see him, I'm reminded of her? And him! The eyes of the woman I loved looking out of the face of... of Potter! Then there's that scar." He lowered his hands and stared hopelessly at Caitlin. "A living, breathing reminder that I couldn't save them. I did all I could but he still found them. He still found them."

Caitlin placed her own hands over his to comfort him. "Ssh. It's alright, Sevi. It's in the past now. And it wasn't your fault they got found. You didn't betray them. It wasn't you who turned traitor." Her voice sounded harsh and her face lost all trace of warmth. Snape noticed the fury in her eyes, and comforted her in turn.

"Cait, leave it. He's in Azkaban now. Where he belongs. They're avenged at least."

She shook her head. "Knowing that won't bring them back, will it?" she snarled. She dropped her eyes. "Every day, Severus, every single day, I find myself thinking things like, I wonder what Lily's going to think of this, or I wonder if Lily's doing anything tonight. Then I have to remember she's not here anymore, I'm never going to have her over for a drink or pick her brains for ideas ever again. Because she's dead. Because Lord Voldemort murdered her!" Her voice rose to a piercing shriek. No one noticed her. Evidently, Anti-Eavesdropping Charms were protecting this particular table, for which Snape was profoundly grateful. Caitlin was drying her eyes.

"It doesn't go away, Severus." she whispered. "It doesn't ever go away. It hurts a little less over time, but it never really goes away. Mel's a good friend to me, so are you, but you're not Lily, either of you. I'm sorry, but there it is."

Snape held her hands in silence. Caitlin broke away to wipe away the tears that were running freely down her cheeks. She smiled ruefully.

"I'm sorry, Sevi. You came here to talk about how you were feeling and get treated to this. I'm surprised you're still here. You can leave me to drown my sorrows if you want."

"I'm not leaving you." Snape said quietly. He forced a smile. "I'm used to it now. Our meetings always seem to involve you crying or screaming at some stage. At least this time it's not over me."

"For once." Caitlin laughed. She recalled why she was there in the first place. "So how's he settling in, anyway?"

"Not bad. He's in Gryffindor. Friends with the newest Weasley to grace Hogwarts."

Caitlin caught her breath and stared at Snape. "Gryffindor?"

"Gryffindor." They looked at each other, identical thoughts occurring to each.

"Then it is him." Caitlin said softly.

"It would appear so." Snape said shortly.

Caitlin played with her wine glass. She smiled wryly at him. "Is Mel ever wrong? She amazes even me sometimes."

Snape snorted. "Hardly Advanced Transfiguration to work out that James Potter's son who is so like him in every other respect would end up in the same house, is it now?"

"She has spoken to you then."

"Of course. Not long after the Gringotts robbery. I am to report back to her on Harry Potter's progress as well. Melissa cannot bear to miss out on what our celebrity hero gets up to next. I think I'll turn it into a cartoon strip, make into one of those action comics. What do you think?"

Caitlin burst out laughing. "Sevi! Be serious. Mel just wants to make sure he's doing all right. Besides, given the current situation, you can hardly blame her for being cautious. What do you know about this Gringotts robbery then?"

"As much as you, if not more. I take it that it was the Philosopher's Stone they were after?"

"It appears so. We've no leads on who it might have been though. At least it should be safe at Hogwarts."

Snape looked doubtful. "Maybe, maybe not. Not all members of the Hogwarts staff team are pure as the driven snow. I have my suspicions about a certain Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

"Samael Quirrell?" Caitlin laughed. "He's scared of his own shadow! Surely he's not working for Voldemort!"

"Who can say? But it's interesting that the year the Redeemer starts Hogwarts, one of her friends falls victim to a deadly potion. And that he was the one who gave the perpetrators the encouragement to actually brew it as a practical experiment."

"Severus, no one else knows who she is." Caitlin said quietly.

"Exactly. They'd narrowed it down to that particular group of four but weren't sure which it was. So they took a chance on it being a known half-blood. Caitlin," Snape said urgently, "he sets off every alarm bell I have. I don't trust him. And this year in particular, the signals are worse than usual. Plus I know for a fact he was in Diagon Alley the day of the robbery. It's him, I know it, I just need proof!"

"Does Mel know all this?" Caitlin asked.

"Of course. But she doesn't have enough evidence to act. Nor, for that matter, do I. But I do intend to keep an eye on him. I don't think he will go for Luella, after all he does know I'm on to him and only a fool would deliberately arouse my over-protective father instincts. Potter could be in danger though, and he's so much more publicly known. Which means I now have to spend the entire year protecting a boy I can't stand who is the son of a man I always hated, all because of some ancient prophecy and the fact that his mother was a friend of mine and my sense of honour obliges me to make up for not saving his parents!" Snape was fuming.

"Sevi, it wasn't your fault." Caitlin said gently. "No one survived once Voldemort decided to kill them. No one except Harry."

"And you. You made it." said Snape. Caitlin's expression changed from consoling to cold in an instant. Snape hastily changed the subject. "Hey, guess who else starts this year. Lucius Malfoy's boy, Draco. He's in Slytherin."

"Unsurprising." Caitlin said icily. "All his ancestors have been Slytherin for generations on both sides. Your point being?"

"Well, I feel rather sorry for the boy. His home life is somewhat less than satisfactory, I gather."

Caitlin laughed derisively. "With Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy as parents? You don't say! Narcissa's 100 per cent bitch and Lucius is worse. Do you know what she as good as called me last week at King's Cross?"

Snape looked uncomfortable. "While I admit that Lucius deserves every abuse you can throw at him, do give Narcissa a break. She's not as bad as you think."

"How would you know? Friends from the 'old days' were you?" said Caitlin scathingly.

"Not exactly. But I know some of her secrets and that counts for a lot."

"Secrets, eh?" Caitlin's interest was aroused. "Do tell!"

"No." said Snape firmly. "I promised her I'd keep quiet. But while there's little I can do for her, I do feel obliged to keep an eye on young Draco. Try and make sure he doesn't turn out like his father."

"Looks like you've got a busy year ahead of you then, doesn't it?" Caitlin observed. "Protecting the Stone, keeping an eye on Luella, watching out for Harry and keeping tabs on Quirrell, then trying to keep Draco Malfoy on the straight and narrow as a side project. I do hope Mel is paying you for all this!" Caitlin grinned.

"Now I won't say all this isn't a nice little earner. Not much Snape family savings left, thanks to my dear departed father's penchant for the bottle." he said sarcastically.

"Yes, I'm now on the DDAE's unofficial payroll. Again. I don't know what it is about me, Caitlin, that makes the Ministry top brass take one look at me and think "secret agent", do you? Hardly James Bond, am I?"

Caitlin couldn't help laughing. "Oh, I don't know. I can just see you in a tux. We could call you Double-Oh-Sevi." She dodged the playful blow Snape aimed at her arm with ease.

"Watch it, Tyler." said Snape casually. He looked at her suddenly and smiled.

"What?" Caitlin asked defensively. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason. I'm just remembering all the times you and I used to meet up in pubs much like this one and just spend ages talking. It's getting rather like old times, don't you think?"

Caitlin's smile faded as she too started remembering. "Not that similar, Sevi." she said sadly. She turned abruptly away.

"Caitlin..." Snape said gently, reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face. Caitlin shrank back from his touch.

"Severus, no. Don't go there. Just don't. I don't want to hear about the past, I don't want to know about the past." Snape opened his mouth to respond but Caitlin cut him short. "Severus, if you and I are going to start socialising again, we need to have some ground rules. First, this stays focused firmly on the present. Don't talk about the past. I want to forget the past. I want to put it behind me. And secondly, don't touch me, don't call me Cait, don't use any terms of endearment for me. I know how you feel about me, but I would rather keep this on a friendship basis. I don't want to get hurt again. Do you understand me, Severus?" Her eyes bored into his.

"Perfectly, Caitlin." Snape replied, a hard edge to his voice. "I just hope you know what you're doing, that's all. You must know by now that playing with me is like playing with fire."

"Well, if we keep our distances, we won't get burned, will we?" Caitlin said coldly. She got up to leave. Snape regarded her with a look of amusement.

"Do you fear me, Caitlin?"

Caitlin froze. She didn't answer immediately. When she did, there was something not quite genuine in her voice.

"Don't be stupid, of course not."

"Well then, you should. Because I'm still dangerous, and just because I've changed sides doesn't mean my inner nature's any different. Take care, Caitlin. Even my self-control has it's limits."

Caitlin turned to look at him, a steely look in her eyes. "So has mine. You're dealing with an Auror here, Severus, and the notoriously psychotic Caitlin Tyler at that. You know what my colleagues call me when they think I can't hear them? The Killing Machine. Caitlin the Cold-blooded, that's me. You think you're dangerous? You have no idea what the years have done to me. There's very little love or kindness left in these veins, and what little there is, Deanna and Luella get. None left for you, Severus. So watch yourself, because you're as vulnerable as I am."

"So why are you the one on the run?" Snape asked softly.

Caitlin bristled. "Who said I'm running?"

"You're about to walk out on me again. Leave, rather than face the truth."

"And that would be?" asked Caitlin icily.

A less brave or foolhardy man would have shut up instantly from the look Caitlin was giving him. However, Severus Snape was not so easily put off.

"That you're in love with me. Still in love with me, after all these years."

Caitlin breathed in, furious. Without even blinking, she reached back and dealt Snape a hard backhander across the face. Snape clutched his jaw in pain and looked back at her in wounded silence.

"Never, ever, say that again," hissed Caitlin. "Ever!" She took a few deep breaths and regained her self-control. "I think," she said coldly, "that it is high time we cut this conversation short. Severus, I daresay we'll be seeing each other soon to discuss the current situation at Hogwarts. Until then, I must bid you adieu. Goodbye, Severus."

Snape inclined his head in the briefest of nods as she left. Downing the rest of his brandy, he allowed a smile to cross his lips. Caitlin had reacted exactly the way he'd hoped.

Snape returned to Hogwarts feeling rather better than he had when he left. True, the prospect of teaching Harry Potter still did not appeal, but talking to Caitlin Tyler had a way of lifting his spirits. Even if their conversations did end up with him get routinely assaulted. No doubt about it, Caitlin was a challenge. However, her reaction had proved one thing - her feelings for him hadn't died. There was hope yet. And if the only caresses that he could get from her were violent slaps around the face, then so be it. Rather any emotion than none at all.

He entered the Hogwarts staff room to find his fellow teachers gathered around something bright and shiny in the corner.

Much like the ravens he'd always kept as pets, Snape couldn't resist shiny things. Caitlin and Lily had frequently remarked that if it hadn't been for his fear of heights, he'd have made a good Seeker. Snape had always felt that they might be right. However, he was more concerned with what his colleagues were interested in now.

It turned out to be a large mirror, with an intricately carved golden frame, and the words *Erised stra ehre oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi* carved across the top. Professor Flitwick was looking into it.

"Well, George? What do you see?" Professor Vector, the Arithmancy teacher, was saying.

"Flourish and Blott's are stocking my new book on Charms!" he squeaked. "And Charms teachers the world over are coming to buy it, it's been so highly recommended!"

Snape peered over his shoulder. Nothing was visible except Flitwick's reflection. He approached Professor McGonagall.

"And what might that be, Minerva?" he asked, trying not to sound too curious.

"The Mirror of Erised." she said absently. "Shows your heart's desire. Apparently Albus needs it for something, but not just yet. So we've got the dubious pleasure of having it here. Pointless waste of time, if you ask me, we've all got work to do." McGonagall sounded most disapproving.

Snape examined the mirror more closely. It didn't show him anything, but maybe you had to be right in front of it to see into it. Professor Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher was now having a go.

"I can see... I can see a unicorn! A tame unicorn, here at Hogwarts! Oh, how beautiful!" He sounded like he was about to weep. Professor Flitwick turned and noticed Snape standing there.

"Severus!" he smiled. "Come and have a look at this! You won't believe what we're all seeing in it. Come on, come and find out what your heart's desire is!"

Snape protested, but found himself dragged to the mirror regardless. Face to face with it at last, he gazed into its depths and saw...

Saw himself standing outside a small cottage. But he wasn't alone. He had his arm around an attractive witch whose features were all too familiar, and she was laughing and smiling up at him. A flash of light shone off her left hand and Snape realised she was wearing a wedding ring. A glance at his own hand confirmed that he was wearing one too. But what really tore at his heart strings was the child standing in front of them. A child with the same dark eyes as him, shining with happiness, and dressed in not dissimilar black robes.

Snape forced himself to look back at his own reflection again. His double was smiling back at him, his eyes brimming with pride in his wife and child. Snape couldn't take any more.

"Severus! What's wrong? What did you see?" Flitwick called after him, bewildered. The Potions teacher had turned abruptly and walked out, hiding his eyes. He appeared deaf to the calls of the other teachers.

"What's up with him now?" Professor Sprout sighed. Professor Flitwick shrugged.

"Gods know. Severus Snape is the touchiest wizard I know. Leave him. Right, who's next?"

Later that night, when everyone else was asleep, Snape stole quietly away to the staff room again. The mirror was still there, propped against the wall. After checking to see that the room was deserted, Snape walked quickly over to it and gazed into it again.

They were still there. The three of them, arms round each other, smiling blissfully. Snape felt it tear at his heart again. Yet he couldn't stop looking this time. Just

couldn't tear his eyes away from his beautiful young wife. Or, for that matter, from the child he never thought he'd have, staring back at him with eyes she could only have inherited from him. My daughter, he thought painfully. That's what my daughter looks like. What's she like, what is she good at, what does she do with her spare time? He had visions of sitting by the fire with her, telling her stories of times gone by, or playing chess with her, going out for walks with her and calling the birds out of the sky so she could learn their names and how to talk to them. He felt the pain tear at him again. I can live without a wife if I have to, Snape thought, but I've never wanted anything more than a child of my own!

"Which one is it, Severus? Is it Lily or Caitlin?" a voice came from behind him. Snape spun round.

Standing behind him, leaning against a table, was Albus Dumbledore.

"You! But how... When did you come in?" Snape was shaking with shock and fury that his private moment had been interrupted.

"I've been waiting for you for some time. Minerva told me about what happened earlier. I wondered when you'd come back."

Snape almost snarled back. "What concern is it if I have? My heart's desire is nothing to do with you!"

Dumbledore didn't seem to mind Snape's attitude. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of prying. But you reacted extremely badly to seeing it earlier, and it's clearly had an effect on you. I wondered which of the two it was, the one you couldn't save, or the one you saved but couldn't heal."

Snape felt the fire go out of him. The pain was almost choking him. "My child." he said softly. "I saw my child. I saw myself as a father." His eyes filled with pain and hurt as he met Dumbledore's gaze. Dumbledore's expression changed to one of surprise mixed with pity. He said nothing, just let the younger wizard continue.

"She had my eyes, my hair, even a similar dress sense. She was really pretty, really innocent. And I can't get it out of my mind how she could be as a person, how we'd get on together. All the little father-daughter things we'd get up to. Could it ever happen, Albus?" Snape felt a fierce, desperate longing burning inside him.

"Who knows, Severus? As Minerva never fails to remind me, Divination is a most imprecise branch of magic. I will, however, tell you this. You are young, you've time on your side. And while one witch is dead, another lives. And she may yet forgive you."

"She can't bear to be in the same room as me for long. Not the stuff happy marriages are made of." Snape said dryly. "And it hurts me just being near her."

Dumbledore smiled. "See? You have much in common. Patience, Severus. Give it time. You two both have a lot of wounds to heal. It won't happen overnight. Don't lose hope. You and Caitlin Tyler were always very close friends at Hogwarts. She was

virtually the only one who could bring you out of yourself. She gave you healing without even knowing she was doing it. I think you can do the same for her, if given the opportunity. I think she will let you, when she's ready. Don't lose hope, Severus."

Snape stared glumly at the floor. "When will that be, when I'm in my hundreds and have forgotten how to go about fathering anything?" he snapped. Dumbledore smiled at him.

"You underestimate yourself, as usual. And her. The bond between you is strong indeed, to have lasted this long and under such pressure. I think it will take less time than you think. However, in the meantime, I must ask you one thing."

"Ask it."

"Not to come looking for the Mirror of Erised again."

Snape gasped in horror. "Professor, please. I need to see them both, I have to. It's my deepest desire, all I've ever wanted. Please!"

Dumbledore was sympathetic but firm. "I'm sorry, Severus, but stronger men than you have gone mad looking at this mirror. You've only seen it twice and look how it's affected you. You cannot live your life in dreams, Severus. I know you want to see your family, but you would be better off searching for them in the real world than wasting away here. I need the Mirror anyway, it cannot remain here. Severus, I'm sorry, but I cannot let you see it again."

Snape nodded miserably. Turning to face the Mirror again, he gazed straight into his daughter's eyes.

"One day, child." he whispered. "One day." He turned back to Dumbledore, barely managing to tear his eyes away from it. "There. I'm done. Happy now?" Leaving the Mirror behind him, he pushed past the Headmaster and returned to his room.

That night, Snape dreamt. He was following his daughter up a mountain trail. "Are we there yet, Dad?" she called back to him.

"Just a little further, dear." he called to her. Finally they reached a clifftop with a single barren tree.

"Now, child. Watch this." Snape called quietly in the language of birds. A raven soared towards them and settled on his outstretched arm. The girl looked on, impressed.

"See, child? A gift that runs in our family. Each one who has the gift can talk to any bird, but they'll always have a speciality. Mine is ravens and crows. Call like this. And your own bird will find you." He showed her how to summon her totem bird. The girl called. From far away, a peregrine falcon came in answer to her summons and settled on her shoulder.

"Ahh. A worthy bird indeed. You are fortunate indeed, my daughter." Snape said proudly.

The girl turned to face him. Seeing her face clearly for the first time, he gasped. It was Deanna Tyler.

"Daughter?" she laughed, and Snape was stunned to see how adult she actually looked. "No daughter of yours. I'd rather have Voldemort for a father than you!"

Snape felt his heart break as she laughed in his face and turned away. A figure approached out of the gathering darkness and Deanna went straight to him, reaching out to embrace him. It was none other than the Dark Lord himself. And with him, crying and looking like she'd been beaten up, was Caitlin, being dragged by the wrist.

"Help me, Severus!" she cried.

"Let her go!" Snape snarled at Voldemort.

Voldemort just laughed. "I'll let her go if you come back to me, Severus. I'll even enchant these two, so that they fall in love with you. You can have that happy family you've always wanted. I can make her worship at your feet." He indicated Caitlin, now on her knees.

"Never!" hissed Snape. "I was a fool to join you in the first place. I'll never go back to you!"

Voldemort shrugged. "Suit yourself. I never liked her anyway." He flung Caitlin to the floor and pointed his wand at her. "Avada Kedavra!"

The green light flashed, and Snape buried his face in his hands, unable to watch. Slowly, he lifted them, terrified of what he might see.

He was no longer on the clifftop. Now he was in the ruins of what had clearly been a mage cottage. Somewhere, a child was crying, but Snape wasn't paying attention. He sifted through the ruins, not wanting to but unable to stop himself. At length he found her. Lying there, green eyes staring into space, face transfixed in fear, her beautiful reddish-brown hair spread out around her, was his first love, Lily Potter nee Evans. And she was dead.

Snape woke up screaming. As he realised where he was, he sank wearily back. "Just a dream, just a dream." he whispered. He lay there for a while before getting up and going to his potions cabinet. He always kept a supply of Sleeping Potion here, for occasions like this. Dreamless sleep guaranteed. This wasn't the first time he'd relived that night after all. Drinking the potion, he returned to bed, sleep already beginning to claim him again. But as he fell asleep, the last thing he saw was Lily Potter's sightless eyes accusing him...

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Chapter Four Unexpected Alliances

Luella and Deanna both looked up with a shock as Marlie stormed into the Serpent's Nest after Quidditch training and threw her Cleansweep down furiously.

Rianne glanced up from her Charms homework. "Something the matter, Marlie?" she enquired.

"You will never believe what's just happened!" she screamed at them. "They've no right to, absolutely no right to at all!"

"No right to what?" Deanna asked.

"No right to put him on their team!" Marlie snapped.

"Who's that, Marlie?" Luella asked, rapidly losing interest. Quidditch was all right, but nothing like as much to worry about as Deanna and Marlie seemed to think it was.

"Who do you think? Golden Boy! Everyone's favourite superstar! Mr. bloody Wonderful!"

Luella and Deanna looked over at Draco. "They've not put Draco Malfoy on the team, have they?" Deanna asked in disbelief.

Marlie shook her head. "Not our team! The bloody Gryffindors! Guess who their new Seeker is?"

"Bloody hell, Marlie, how would we know?" Deanna asked. "I haven't got a clue who the Gryffindors have got that's any good."

"Harry bloody Potter!" Marlie screeched. "Harry I-defeated-the-Dark-Lord-aren't-I-wonderful Potter!"

"Harry?" gasped Luella. "But he's only a first year! How??"

"I don't know." Marlie snapped, flinging herself into a chair. "But apparently they're bending the rules for him. Bloody hell, folks, just because he's a bleeding celebrity, on to the team he goes."

Luella doubted this very much. "But Marlie, he's not that type. I mean, he's no Malfoy, is he? He didn't ask to be famous, and I'm sure he wouldn't exploit it just to get on the Quidditch team. Anyway, look who's talking! Very similar things were said when you got picked, don't you remember?"

"I do, if you don't." Rianne pointedly reminded her. "And I think that you, of all people, have no right to complain about them playing a first year Seeker."

"Suppose." Marlie sulked. "Doesn't mean I have to like the idea though." She got up and headed for their dorm to retrieve her Transfiguration homework.

"Guess we'd better make a start on that Potions assignment." Deanna sighed. "Don't want to get on Snapey's bad side, do we?"

"Haven't you done that yet?" Rianne asked in surprise. "I've already finished it."

"You would." Deanna muttered. "Well, those of us less in love with Professor Snape are still working on it. Lu, have you got that textbook out of the library yet?"

Luella groaned. "No. Damn. I'll have to go and get it now before the library closes."

"Well, hurry up. Can't do the work without it. Although, seeing as it's Snape... Actually, take your time, mate." Deanna grinned as Luella headed out into the corridor.

Luella browsed through the shelves slowly. Somewhere in here, surely... At last, she found the book she was looking for, grabbed it off the shelves and headed for the Loans desk.

She was brought up short, however, by an unexpected sound. Was that... someone crying? Luella crept quietly in the direction of the noise and found herself in a quiet corner of the library. Sitting alone at a table was a girl with lots of bushy brown hair wearing Gryffindor colours. It was she who had been crying. Her arms were folded on the table and she'd buried her face in her hands.

Luella felt her heart go out to the poor girl. There but for the whim of fate... She was forcibly reminded of herself not so many years ago, friendless and picked on, apart from Deanna. She went over to her and sat down.

"Er... are you all right?" she said softly. The crying girl looked up startled and blushed scarlet.

"Oh! I didn't hear you there. Yeah, yeah I'm fine." The girl hastily dried her eyes. Luella wasn't fooled, not after hanging around Deanna for the last ten years.

"You don't look it. What's up?" she said gently.

The girl gulped. "Nothing. It's just that..." She burst into tears again. "I've been so looking forward to coming to Hogwarts and now I'm here, it's horrible!"

Luella tried to comfort her, reaching in her pockets for some tissues. "Hey, it's all right. What's happened? Is it the work or your housemates?"

The girl laughed bitterly. "I'm top of every class. Everything comes so easily to me. It's my housemates. I've tried to be nice, tried to be friendly, but no one likes me! You should hear the things they say about me behind my back, it's horrible. Especially that Ron Weasley. He keeps saying what a nightmare I am. It's not fair, I've tried to be good at things and get points for Gryffindor, and no one cares! Everyone hates me!"

She dissolved into helpless crying. Luella gave her a hug and dried the other girl's eyes.

"Hey. It'll be OK. You're a smart girl, someone must like you. Maybe you want to hang around with Ravenclaws, they always like the intelligent people. You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? What's your name?"

"Hermione Granger." the girl sniffed. "What's yours?"

"Luella Martin. Third year. Muggle-born Slytherin, but don't hold that against me."

"I'm Muggle-born too." Hermione Granger said quietly. "I was so surprised when I got the letter telling me I was a witch. Mind you, it explained a lot. My parents were amazed too. They're really proud of me. I haven't told them about how I'm feeling, I don't want to let them down. But I don't know if I can take much more of this!"

Luella soothed her. "Hey. At least your parents were pleased. Mine wouldn't let me go at first until the witch living across the road talked them round. They're really pleased now though, they can tell all their friends that their daughter goes to an exclusive Scottish boarding school."

Hermione started. "You had a witch living across the road from you?"

"Oh yes. She's my best friend Deanna's mother. She's an Auror, Caitlin Tyler."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Caitlin Tyler? *The* Caitlin Tyler? The one who caught the notorious Death Eaters Rosier and Wilkes? The one who brought in Crouch Jr. and the Lestranges after they tortured the Longbottoms? The one who caught the vampire terrorising Yorkshire in the summer of 1986? And who's second-in-command to Melissa Lovegood herself? Caitlin Tyler, officially the most dangerous and feared Auror at the DDAE? That Caitlin Tyler?"

"Er... possibly." Luella said hastily, realising she knew very little about what Deanna's mother actually did for a living.

"But she's one of the most famous Aurors around! She's in *Recent Dark Arts Defeats* and everything! Dark mages have been known to turn themselves in on hearing that she's on their case! Everyone's terrified of her. And you know her? What's she like?"

"She's nice. Friendly. Bit scary though sometimes. She's always been good to me. Always been glad to have me round and talk to me when things have been getting me down. I didn't know she was a witch until I came here, of course, but I always suspected something." Luella wasn't sure what to say. She was still having difficulty with someone hero-worshipping Mrs. Tyler, who was as familiar to her as breathing.

"Wow, you know Caitlin Tyler!" Hermione was very impressed. She leaned closer. "Can you get me her autograph?"

Luella grinned. "If you want. I don't think she's in the habit of giving out signed photos, but I'm sure she won't mind. In fact, while you're asking, I may as well tell you I also know Melissa Lovegood as well. One of my other friends is her daughter."

Hermione nearly fell off her chair. "Melissa Lovegood! She's my role model! First ever female Department Head, possible future Minister of Magic, arrested so many dangerous criminals. She is so intelligent! So cunning! So brave! Can I have hers too?"

Luella grinned. "Go on then, I'll ask Marlie for you. It'll probably have to be cleared for security gods know how many times by who knows how many people, so it could take a while, but I'll see. Anyone else you want? I can sort out Alfredo Stormosi too if you're interested."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not really into Quidditch. I'd far rather find out about famous Aurors and Anti-Dark Arts fighters. Their exploits are so much more relevant, and you can learn so much! I've been reading all sorts about them, it's so exciting! I want to be an Auror one day, it sounds like the best job ever."

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I should introduce you to my friend Deanna. She's into all that too. I think you'd like her."

They were interrupted by Madam Pince announcing that the library would be closing in five minutes. Luella got up to get her book checked out.

"I'd better go, I need this for my Potions assignment and I'm not risking Snape's wrath, even if I am one of his favourite pupils."

Hermione followed her, surprised. "You're one of Snape's favourites? How?" "Well, it helps being Slytherin. It helps being consistently brilliant at his subject. It helps being..." Luella suddenly stopped herself. How could she be so foolish? She'd almost revealed her secret to this young Gryffindor. "Doesn't matter." she said quickly. "Anyway, he seems to like me. Gods know how."

Hermione did not press the point. "Well, they do say he favours Slytherin. I don't think he's so bad, but he does pick on Neville Longbottom a lot. And Harry Potter. And Ron Weasley, but Ron brings it on himself most of the time." she said disapprovingly. Luella grinned. Sounded like Ron took after his brothers all right.

They left the library and prepared to go their own separate ways. Hermione lingered for a while, clearly unwilling to go back to the Gryffindor common room.

"You will get me those autographs, won't you?" she said anxiously. Luella smiled.

"Of course I will. You have my word as a Slytherin. And Hermione, listen." She lowered her voice. "If you ever feel upset again, come find me. Send me an owl or something, and we can meet up, have a chat about things. How's that?"

Hermione looked pathetically grateful. "Thanks. You've been really kind. Not at all like everyone says Slytherins are." She immediately clapped her hands to her mouth, shocked at what she'd just said. Luella smiled.

"Relax, Hermione. I know what everyone else says about us. I mean, I know Fred and George Weasley, for a start. I'm used to it. For what it's worth, in a lot of cases, they're absolutely right. Anyway, if you ever need me, owl me. Or even if you don't, owl me anyway. It'd be nice to talk to someone different for a change. Not that I don't like my friends, but I do spend ninety percent of my time with them after all."

"OK, I will." Hermione nodded. "See you soon, Luella!"

"See you soon, Hermione." And with that, the two girls parted, Hermione Granger in a much better mood than she had been before.

Deanna burst out laughing when Luella told her what had happened.

"She wants what? My mum's autograph?"

"So?" Luella said, feeling strangely hurt. "Your mum's quite a famous Auror, you know! She's got fans to satisfy. Oh, Hermione wants Mrs. Lovegood's autograph too. Marlie, can you arrange that?"

Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Someone wants my mother's autograph? Why?"

"She's her role model. Stop looking at me like that! They're not for me, they're for this first year I met in the library."

"Oh. Right. Firsties. That explains everything. All right, I'll write home and ask her. Ri, can I borrow Barney?" Marlie asked lazily.

"Go on then." Rianne said, now working on her History of Magic essay.

Deanna still seemed unable to comprehend why anyone would want her mother's autograph. "I mean, I'll ask her, but I'm still not sure why anyone would want a signed photo of my mum."

"I'm amazed you have to ask that, you who swallows past exploits of Aurors for breakfast. You who keeps Burke and O'Reilly, that 500-page tome on how to defeat Dark mages, as a little light bedtime reading." Luella said, rather pointedly.

"Yeah, I know, but they're all dead. They're not my mum." Deanna shifted uncomfortably, before getting out her quill. "So how do you spell Hermione anyway?"

The days passed uneventfully, and it was soon time for the first major event of the year - the Halloween Feast. The four Slytherins were anticipating the feast with glee.

"I love Halloween!" Marlie was saying enthusiastically. "So much cool food, not to mention the opportunity for a good party. Shame they won't let us go trick or treating the other houses."

"Good thing too." Rianne said disapprovingly. "Can you imagine what sort of thing the Weasleys would get up to? They're quite bad enough as it is, the last thing we want to do is actually give them the opportunity to play pranks."

All four of them contemplated this for a minute. The thought did not appeal.

"No, you're right, Ri, that's a really bad idea." Marlie said hastily. "Forget I said anything. Come on, let's get a move on, get some good seats for the feast."

They were interrupted by someone pushing past them, and running off in the direction of the dungeons.

"Hey!" Deanna yelled. "Watch where you're going!" The figure did not reply, just kept running. Luella recognised the scarlet and gold of Gryffindor and that bushy hair immediately. She also recognised the sound of sobbing. It was Hermione.

"I'd better go after her." sighed Luella. "She sounded pretty upset to me."

"You'll miss the feast!" Marlie gasped.

"I'll turn up for the end." Luella promised.

"Miss the main course just for some little Gryffindor first year?" Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"I happen to like her." Luella said, a little put out. "Anyway, she's got no one else and I promised her I'd look out for her. See you guys later. Save me a seat, won't you?" And with that, she raced after Hermione.

The other three watched her go.

"Are you sure she's a Slytherin?" Marlie asked Deanna.

"She's always been like that." Deanna sighed. "Big softy. Too nice for her own good. Come on, let's leave her to do her Good Samaritan bit." She led the way to the Great Hall.

Luella tracked Hermione to the girls' toilets just inside the dungeon entrance. Two other Gryffindor girls were in there, shouting to Hermione who had locked herself in a cubicle.

"Come on Hermione, you'll miss the feast!" one shouted.

"I don't care!" a muffled voice came from behind the toilet door. "I don't want to go anyway. Leave me alone!"

The other girl turned to her friend. "No use arguing, Lavender, if she wants to be like that, leave her."

The first girl nodded. "Guess so Parvati. Hermione? We're going now. We'll save you a seat if you change your mind."

Hermione didn't respond. The girls shrugged and left. Luella walked over to the door and knocked quietly.

"Go away, Lavender!" Hermione shouted. "I told you to leave me alone!"

"It's me, Luella." Luella said uncertainly. "They've gone now. Hermione, are you all right? You sound awful."

The door opened. Hermione Granger peeked out from behind it, her pretty face streaked with tears. Luella did a double-take. Hermione looked really upset.

"Oh, Luella!" she sobbed, bursting into tears. "I'm so unhappy! Everyone hates me! I thought they did before, but now I know they do! I heard Ron Weasley telling his friend Harry how horrible I was!"

Luella got some paper towels out of the dispenser and soothed Hermione as best as she could. This looked like it was going to take a while.

Deanna, Marlie and Rianne were busily helping themselves to the first course at the feast.

"Well, I don't know where Lu's got to," Marlie said as she munched her way through a prawn cocktail, "but she's missing a treat. Deanna, pass me some tortilla chips."

"Tortilla chips? With prawn cocktail? Marlie, you are seriously sick. I hope you're not planning on having salsa and guacamole with those." Deanna said, but she passed them to her anyway.

The proceedings were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Professor Quirrell, turban askew. He raced to Dumbledore's chair and gasped, "Troll - in the dungeons - thought you ought to know." before collapsing to the floor.

Chaos erupted as students began screaming and panicking. Dumbledore let out a few firecrackers from his wand to bring silence and instructed the Prefects to lead students back to their common rooms immediately.

Debra leapt to her feet and began shouting instructions at the Slytherins. "Come on, you lot." she snapped. "Back to the Nest. All of you! That includes you, Malfoy." Draco looked fed up. Evidently he'd been hoping to get a look at the troll for himself, for Debra had caught him trying to sneak away unobserved.

The three Slytherins followed the rest of their house out of the room. As they left, Deanna suddenly froze and turned to Rianne, horrified.

"Lu!" she gasped.

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Tyler, you're losing it. I'm Rianne, remember?"

"Don't be an idiot." Deanna snapped. "I mean, what about Luella? She doesn't know about the troll, suppose she runs into it! We've got to go and find her!"

Rianne's face went pale, but she had the presence of mind to grab Deanna's arm.

"Go after it ourselves? Are you mad? Have you seen the size of the average mountain troll? No, we've got to find Professor Snape and tell him. Come on!" She pushed her way through to the teachers' table and caught Snape's arm as he was leaving.

Snape glared at them. "What on earth are you three doing? Get back to the common room immediately. You heard Dumbledore!"

"Sir, it's Luella!" Rianne gasped. "She's out there in the school and doesn't know about the troll. Suppose she runs into it? You've got to help find her!"

Snape froze, paralysed with shock. He recovered quickly.

"Where did you last see her?" he said.

"She was heading for the dungeons. One of her friends was upset about something and she was going after them to cheer them up." Marlie said, her lip trembling.

Snape seemed to relax a little. "Then she's probably back at the common room with them now."

"She won't be!" Deanna snapped. "The friend in question was a Gryffindor!"

"A Gryffindor?" Snape said, somewhat confused. He shrugged, brushing it off. "All right. Whatever. Listen, you three get back to the common room and STAY THERE! No heroic attempts to take on the troll yourselves. Especially you, Miss Tyler. I'll try and find her." And with that, he was gone, rushing over to find Professor McGonagall.

Deanna watched him go furiously. "And how's he going to know where to look?" she snapped. "I'm going to go find her."

Rianne and Marlie caught her again and frogmarched her after the rest of the Slytherins.

"No way." Rianne said firmly. "You heard him. You are coming back with us and you are staying there. Luella and Hermione are the best witches in their years; if anyone can hold off a full-grown troll until help arrives it's them. Come on!" Deanna complained at this, but was in no position to argue with both her friends, so allowed herself to be dragged off to the Serpents' Nest.

Luella and Hermione were still in the girls' toilets, seated against the wall, crouched on the floor. Hermione was no longer crying, but was still pretty miserable.

"What am I going to do, Lu?" she whispered. "Ron's right, I've got no friends here! All the other girls think I'm a snobbish goody-two shoes just because I care about my work and I'm not interested in boys or make-up or girly things."

"Deanna's not really into any of that either. Or me, for that matter! Don't let them get to you, kid." Luella said quietly. "Nothing wrong with wanting to excel. You wait, ten years from now, you'll be climbing the ladders of success at the Ministry while they're all having kids."

"Very Slytherin." Hermione remarked acidly. "But that doesn't help me now!"

"No." admitted Luella. "But it might help you get by if you've that to look forward to. Who cares if they don't like you? I like you. And I'm sure there's others who like you too. You're a cool person, Hermione. Really!"

Hermione nodded weakly. She was about to respond, when the most awful stench reached their noses.

"What on earth is that?" Luella gasped, pulling her robes across her face. Hermione looked equally blank. They both heard something shuffling in, and the door slamming shut. Luella felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and reached for her wand.

Something stumbled around the corner and into view. Hermione screamed. Luella shot to her feet, the blood draining from her face. Although she'd never seen one, she'd paid enough attention in Defence Against the Dark Arts to recognise a troll when it stumbled into view.

"Oh my god." Hermione was whimpering. "Oh my god, Luella, what is it?"

"It's a troll." Luella said quietly. "Get up and get your wand, quick. We're going to have to fight it."

Hermione staggered to her feet and produced her wand. Luella was pleased to see that the young Gryffindor wasn't panicking completely. She shielded the young witch and raised her wand as the troll advanced on them, knocking sinks off the wall and growling furiously, its club raised.

Luella waved her wand and used the first spell that came to mind. "*Expelliarmus!*" The troll's club flew out of its hand and crashed to the floor. The troll looked stupidly at its empty hand then roared even louder.

"Deanna's favourite tactic that." Luella said ruefully. "Unfortunately, Deanna doesn't normally take on opponents that are twelve foot tall with big muscles and angry. Run!" She pulled Hermione out of the way as the troll's fist smashed into the wall where they'd been standing. Sobbing, Hermione staggered after Luella as the two girls ran past the troll and headed for the door.

The door flew open as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley burst in, wands in hand.

"Are you two all right?" Harry gasped.

"Apart from having to deal with a full-grown mountain troll, yeah!" Luella snapped, as she dodged the troll's blows, Hermione clambering after her. "Don't just stand there, help us!" She dived to the floor and rolled out of the way as the troll aimed another punch at them. Hermione, pulled down by Luella, sprawled over the floor and wept. The troll, instinctively sensing which of the two girls was more vulnerable, reached out to grab her.

Ron was first to react. Throwing a tap at the troll, he shouted "Oi! Leave them alone, ugly!" The troll heard the yell and turned to face the two boys. Harry immediately took a step backwards. Ron seized the opportunity to run to Hermione's side and help her up. Luella, on Hermione's other side, gave him a hand peeling the terrified girl off the floor. The three of them looked horrified at Harry, who was now cornered. The troll was advancing on him, growling mercilessly.

"What do we do?" Luella said helplessly. The young boy looked scared out of his wits. Ron looked around and noticed the troll's abandoned club. He ran over to it and tried to lift it. It slid out of his hands with a crash.

"Too heavy!" he said frantically.

"Of course it is, you'll need a Levitation Charm to lift that!" Luella snapped.

"A Levitation Charm!?" he moaned. "I'm rubbish at them!"

"Then you'd better improve bloody quickly, hadn't you?" Luella said tersely. Ron just looked blankly at her. Luella sighed and raised her own wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The club's handle lifted into the air first and then the entire club. However, it wobbled far too much for comfort and Luella realised how heavy it actually was. It was taking all her power just to keep it in the air, never mind lift it.

"Help... me!" she gasped. Ron pointed his wand at it and cast his own Charm. It immediately stabilised and Luella relaxed a little. However, even with two of them, it was still difficult to control.

Next to them, Hermione seemed to unfreeze and come to life. A third Charm joined theirs and the three of them managed to guide the club so it was hanging just over the troll's head.

The troll had almost reached Harry now. He was pinned against the wall, wand in hand, a look of grim determination on his face. His eyes registered the club hovering over the troll's head and he shifted as far away as he could.

Luella glanced at Ron and Hermione, who seemed to be nearing the end of their power. "Ready? On the count of three, drop it. One, two, three."

They released the club. It plummeted out of the air and smashed straight into the troll's skull. Harry saw the troll go cross-eyed, pause, then without moving a muscle, fall crashing to the ground.

The four children looked at each other, all breathing deeply. Hermione broke the silence.

"Is it dead?" she whispered, her voice quiet and trembling.

Harry was kneeling next to the troll. "I don't think so, I think it's just knocked out." he said, examining it carefully.

Ron was staring at Hermione. "Are you OK?" he asked nervously. "You looked awful back then."

Hermione nodded weakly. "Thanks to you three." she whispered. "Some Gryffindor I am! I wouldn't have had that Levitation Charm idea! I was too scared to move!"

Luella blushed a little. "Well, it was Harry who inspired me. Seeing Ron trying to lift that club reminded me of Harry trying to drag that trunk of his at King's Cross. I used one then too."

Ron glared at Luella and opened his mouth to say something unpleasant, but he never got the chance. The door flew open again and Professors McGonagall, Snape and Quirrell burst in. Quirrell took one look at the troll and had to sit down, clutching his heart. Snape wasted no time but strode straight over to Luella, who felt her heart sinking. Her House Master did not look pleased.

"Luella Martin!" he shouted at her, his eyes blazing. "What on earth do you think you are doing, wandering around the school like this when there's a troll loose? Trying to play the hero, were you? Thought you'd come to the rescue, did you?" His eyes swept around the room and fell on Harry. "Ah yes." he said softly. "Harry Potter. I might have known. Leading my Slytherins astray as usual, I see." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "Shall I let you deal with these three? I need to get this one back to her common room before she gets into any more trouble. Her little clique are notorious for attracting it. Come, Miss Martin." He seized Luella by the arm and hauled her out. Luella sighed, and smiled at Hermione, who looked more terrified of Snape than she had done of the troll. Winking at her, she mouthed "Don't worry. I'll be fine." before Snape dragged her out into the corridor.

Harry and Ron made their way back to Gryffindor Tower, relieved that was all over.

"Harry, I don't ever want to face one of those things again. I don't care how many points we get given." Ron said fervently.

"Certainly not if all we're going to get is ten between us." Harry agreed.

"Five, you mean. After she's taken five off Hermione." Hermione, to everyone's surprise, not least her own, had covered for them both by claiming they were trying to help her after she'd gone to hunt down the troll herself. "Then there's the five she gave Luella, who's Slytherin, so after all that, we're no better off than before!" Ron looked fed up.

Harry pictured Luella, being hauled out of the room by a Professor Snape more livid than he'd ever seen him. "I hope she's all right." he said nervously. "I don't envy her at the moment."

Ron seemed unconcerned. "I wouldn't worry. From what I've heard, she gets more marks than Hermione does, plus she's in Slytherin. Snape's not going to be too hard on her, is he? Worse than that'll happen is she gets a detention and loses Slytherin a bundle of points, which is good news for us. Come on, the rest of that feast's waiting for us."

Snape dragged Luella out into the corridor and around the corner, out of earshot of the toilets. Only then did he stop walking and release her. He turned to stare at her, his eyes flashing with rage.

"Well, Miss Martin?" he said softly. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

Luella gulped. She knew far better than to lie to him. Not after what happened last time she'd tried to get one over the Potions master.

"I'm sorry, sir." she said quietly. "I saw Hermione rushing off towards the toilets looking upset, so I went after her to see what was wrong. We talked for a bit, then that troll came barging in. I used a Disarming Charm to get rid of its club then we dodged around the room trying to get away. Harry and Ron came in at that point, I think they were looking for Hermione. Harry distracted it and it went after him. Ron tried to lift the troll's club to knock it out but it was too heavy, so the three of us, him, Hermione and me, Levitated it and dropped it on the troll's head. You came in just after that."

Luella glanced up nervously. She couldn't swear to it, but Snape's anger seemed to have subsided a little and he looked almost impressed.

"So you were not actually seeking the troll out then." Snape said, sounding rather more calm.

Luella shook her head. "No, I was checking up on Hermione. She's a friend of mine and she's been having a rough time of it lately. I wanted to make sure she was all right."

"Very noble of you." Snape said dryly. He regarded her carefully. Luella couldn't even begin to read the emotions she saw there. "However, you were very lucky there. I don't want you taking risks like that in future. You are only thirteen and not that powerful yet. I do not want you getting the idea that you are invulnerable and plunging straight into whatever reckless adventure that Miss Tyler dreams up next. You are far too important to lose. Do you understand me?" His eyes burned intensely into hers.

Luella felt her own anger beginning to rise. "I understand you, Professor." she said bitterly. "You're saving me for Voldemort to finish off, aren't you?"

Snape's eyes bulged in stunned surprise. He recovered his composure and gazed at her shrewdly.

"So Caitlin has told you, then."

"Of course she told me." Luella said, meeting his gaze steadily. "She thought I had a right to know the truth. Question is, who told you?"

"Come now, Luella, I'm your House Master. It's my job to know these things. Let's just say I'm under orders to keep a benevolent eye on you."

"It's whose orders they are that's troubling me." Luella said darkly.

A hint of sadness crept into Snape's eyes. "Do you have any faith in me? I went out of my way to save your friend Miss Lovegood in your first year."

"Which nearly resulted in my best friend's death along the way." Luella commented tartly. "And don't tell me you were acting out of altruism. I heard Mrs. Lovegood threatening to expose all your dark secrets to the world if Marlie didn't make it. Don't even bother denying it."

Snape went ashen. Luella immediately wished she hadn't said that. Snape looked murderously angry. However, he restrained himself.

"Just get back to your common room." he said sharply. "The feast will be continuing there." He turned on his heel and left Luella standing there, a sense of foreboding hanging over her.

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Chapter Five Dangerous Revelations

Luella was greeted at breakfast the next day by Hermione, who rushed straight over to her, with Harry and Ron in tow.

"Luella!" she gasped. "Are you alright?"

Behind Luella, Deanna grinned and ushered Marlie and Rianne off so they could talk. Luella smiled at the first year.

"I'm fine. Snape gave me a verbal tongue-lashing, which was far from pleasant, but I was able to convince him I'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. How are you three?"

"OK." Harry said. "Hermione told McGonagall she'd gone after the troll to take it on herself, so we're in the clear. She lost five points, but me and Ron got five each for rescuing her. You got five as well. I told her you'd tried to stop us, but insisted on coming when that didn't work."

"Ah." Luella said. "I told Snape that I'd been comforting Hermione after she ran off crying and the troll burst in on us. Which has the virtue of being true. Let's hope they don't confer at any point, because I have no idea how to wriggle out of it if they do." She turned Hermione. "How are you feeling now? Better?"

Hermione nodded brightly. "I'm fine now. I just wanted to see how you were and say thank you for helping me out last night. We couldn't have done it without you, could we?"

Harry shook his head and smiled gratefully. Ron just glared, muttering something about not needing help from Slytherins, thank you. Hermione looked pointedly at him. Luella decided to ignore him, turning back to Hermione.

"So I take it you three are mates now?" she said, smiling. Hermione nodded, beaming. Luella grinned and turned to Harry.

"Well, in that case, I probably won't have to go rushing off after her again with the old Kleenex, but all the same... You two look after her and be nice, OK? If I find Hermione all alone and friendless again, I shall be hunting you both down with Deanna in tow. Got that?"

"We'll look after her." Harry promised.

"Good. Then I'll let you enjoy your breakfasts. See you guys later." The three Gryffindors returned to their table, Harry and Hermione bickering with Ron. Luella grinned and sat down with Deanna. Hermione seemed happy enough. One less thing to worry about. Luella glanced up at the teachers' table and swiftly looked away again. Snape was watching her most carefully and must surely have seen them talking. She recalled their previous night's conversation with a shudder. So Snape did know about her and clearly had done for some time. Question was, could he be trusted? The evidence either way was inconclusive. On the one hand, he did have a past with dark

secrets. On the other, he was apparently protecting her. Deanna's description of his reaction to her disappearance last night, Snape's reaction on finding her, and the hurt in his eyes when he'd realised she didn't trust him were not the actions of someone who cared little for her. On the contrary, she'd been reminded strongly of how her own parents would have acted. Snape never, ever raised his voice when disciplining students; he never needed to. Sarcasm was usually enough. He'd not used sarcasm last night.

Caitlin Tyler looked up with a shock as Snape limped into the Three Broomsticks. His letter had been short and to the point, merely asking her to meet him that evening. Judging from the look on his face and the pronounced limp that hadn't been there before, all was not well.

"Severus!" she gasped. "Are you alright? Sit down, let me get you a drink. What happened to your leg?"

Snape accepted the shot glass from her brusquely. He lost no time getting to the point. "Caitlin, what exactly have you told Luella about me?? She seems to think I'm the next Lord Voldemort!"

"I can promise you I've said no such thing." Caitlin retorted. "In fact, I distinctly remember telling her you were trustworthy. What happened, Severus?"

"Someone let a troll into the school on Halloween. Quirrell staggered into the feast, claiming there was one loose in the dungeons and passed out. We eventually tracked it down to the girls' toilets just inside the dungeon entrance, where it had been knocked out with its own club."

"Knocked out with its own club?" Caitlin repeated in sceptical disbelief. "Severus, not even a troll is that stupid."

"You are, of course, right. Four students had got there first and Levitated the club onto the troll's head."

Caitlin groaned. She could guess only too well which four students those had been.

"What has she done this time?" she said, wearily. "Have you told Mel, Alfredo and the Martins yet?"

Snape smiled. "No need. Only one Slytherin was involved, the rest were all Gryffindors. Rest assured your own daughter was safe in her common room the whole time. No, the students in question were Luella, and three Gryffindor first years. Namely Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and a Muggle-born by the name of Hermione Granger."

Caitlin immediately sprang to attention. "Harry and Luella!" she gasped. "Are they alright? They could have been killed!"

"They're fine. Mercifully. It is, however, interesting that the troll happened to find them. I am told that Luella had gone after Miss Granger who was upset about something, and the boys were looking for them to warn them about the troll. Anyway, Minerva, Quirrell and myself were next on the scene, after the troll had been immobilised. Quirrell proved no help at all, collapsing with fear at the sight of the troll. I took Luella out of there and left Minerva to deal with the other three. I ascertained from Luella what had happened, and warned her about the dangers of thinking she was invulnerable because she'd been lucky enough to escape a troll. That is when I discovered she was aware of her destiny. She seemed to think I was fattening her up like a lamb to the slaughter, some kind of sacrifice to the Dark Lord. It would appear that she thinks I'm working for Voldemort." He looked reproachfully at her. "Why did you not tell her I could be trusted?"

"Why didn't you tell her you were working for Mel?" Caitlin snapped.

Snape shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. Probably the same reason you neglected to inform me that she knew already. Does anyone trust me at all?"

"Mel trusts you." Caitlin said. "So do I, for that matter. And Luella knows you helped save Marlie."

"Yes, and she also knows that Melissa virtually blackmailed me into doing it. Earning her trust now is going to be difficult if not impossible. And for a while back in the first year, I thought I'd managed it. Maybe she was just feeling guilty. She was in trouble at the time after all."

"Luella Martin, in trouble? Whatever for?" Caitlin said, a little surprised.

"Did Melissa tell you about the Stormosi Incident? I did spend more time than I really needed to talking it over with her."

"Oh, that. Yes, it was mentioned. Luella was involved then?"

"Gained access to the Restricted Section under false pretences, and found out about Branwen. Then told Rianne."

"Ouch."

"Yes, ouch. Easily one of the more stressful weeks of my life. However, back to the present. Seeing as Luella likes you, how about you write to her and reassure her that I'm trustworthy? I can't do my job properly if Luella thinks I'm Evil Incarnate."

"OK, I'll see what I can do." Caitlin promised. "Now, back to this troll. How did it get into the school in the first place? There are no trolls in this area, and there's magic keeping them out even if there were. So who let it in and why? And why are you now limping?"

"Now we come to the interesting bit, my dear." Snape said, leaning closer. "You've clearly been dying to find out about this limp of mine all evening, and I'm now going

to tell you." Caitlin leaned forward in anticipation. Snape smiled grimly and continued.

"Now, as you so rightly suggested, that troll did not find its way in there on its own. It immediately came to my mind that whoever had let the troll in had done so in order to create a diversion while they went in search of what we both know is being safeguarded in Hogwarts at this very moment. With that in mind, I went directly to the hiding place in order to head them off."

"And? Who was it?"

"I arrived before them, luckily. Opened the door, went in, came face to face with that accursed guard dog of Hagrid's. Nearly got my leg bitten off until a few well-placed fire charms persuaded it to let me go. Anyway, I abandoned any idea of investigating further and left with as much haste as I could. Locking the door behind me, I decided to keep watch and see who arrived. And who do I run into but our dear friend Samael, who appeared to have recovered himself unusually quickly."

"Quirrell!" Caitlin gasped. "Tell me more..."

"Well, he claimed to be there for the same reason I was, trying to see if anyone had gone after the Stone. Needless to say, I was suspicious, but had no proof to confront him with. Nor did I have the chance to question him further, as we were interrupted by the sound of crashing, banging, shouting and other noises generally associated with a fight. Making sure Quirrell came with me, I went off to investigate, met up with Minerva, and the three of us walked in on an unconscious troll and four rather shocked students. I believe you know the rest."

Caitlin looked thoughtful. "It looks suspicious, I must say. But there's still nothing to pin on Quirrell. He could have just been trying to see if the Stone's OK. Damn, this is frustrating!" She slammed the table angrily.

"There's more. I've taken the liberty of doing a little research into Quirrell's background, and it would seem that one of his areas of expertise is trolls. Seems he can control them magically. So he's more than capable of letting one into the school. Given this, it is also odd that having discovered one, he runs in fright, lets everyone know in the most dramatic way possible and collapses. Almost as if he were aiming at creating maximum chaos. And when he sees the troll knocked out, he nearly faints again. As if he's shocked that his troll's been taken out by some students, none of whom are more than thirteen. Suspicious doesn't even begin to sum up the situation." Snape said, his eyes blazing coldly.

"Still all circumstantial evidence though." Caitlin sighed. "We need proof, Sevi! And my talented daughter has given me inspiration. Here, I've got you this." She produced a package for him. Snape unwrapped it curiously and laughed to see the contents.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing this again. Miss Lovegood's Walkmage, isn't it?"

"A copy of it, yes. We've had Marlie and Leonard Lovegood producing them for our use. Marlie's been given special permission to use magic for the purpose of

constructing them over the holidays. We've got about ten of them now, they're very useful little things. Anyway, Mel has asked that you have one. We need a taped confession out of him. Somehow, you'll have to gain his trust. Pretend you want to help him steal the Stone. If he admits it and you can tape it, we have him."

Snape slipped the Walkmage into his pocket. "Isn't this unethical?"

"Not as long as you don't trick him or force him into saying something he wouldn't otherwise have said. The laws of evidence don't take Walkmages into account yet anyway, so we're quite safe. Besides, you were quite willing to accept it as evidence two years ago!" She gave him a penetrating stare.

"True, true, but my reputation isn't on the line now, is it?"

"Sevi, there'll be a lot more than just your reputation at stake if Quirrell gets that Stone. Particularly if Mel's theory about a possible Voldemort connection is true."

"Alright, point taken. I can't say I'm that concerned about Quirrell anyway."

"Good. How is your leg now anyway? Have you had Madam Pomfrey take a look at it yet?"

"No. I'd really rather not have to explain to her how it got in that state. Quirrell might find out. Filch is assisting with treating it; he's my cousin and owes me a few favours. He'll keep quiet if he knows what's good for him. I've brewed myself up some healing and painkilling potions, and the bandages have got Anti-Infection Charms on them. I'll survive, although I'll probably be scarred for life."

Caitlin looked concerned. "Severus! That wound's really serious, you should get it seen to! Damn secrecy! And you a mediwizard too!"

"Ex-mediwizard." Snape said shortly. "And that's precisely why I'm not seeing Madam Pomfrey. I know what I'm doing, Caitlin! It'll heal. Eventually. Shame the Asclepio Charm can't be used on yourself. It would save me a lot of pain."

Caitlin still looked worried. "Well, if you won't be talked out of it... But if it gets any worse, you get yourself to the hospital wing straight away, understand? Promise me, Sevi!"

Snape sighed. Caitlin was obviously not going to let this drop. "Very well, very well, if you insist!" he said, rather more sharply than he needed to. "Does that satisfy you, woman?"

Caitlin smiled. Twenty-five years of friendship with Snape had immunised her against his less than charming side. "Perfectly, Sevi. Now on to more pleasant topics. Isn't it the famous Gryffindor/Slytherin grudge match next weekend?"

"It is indeed. And you won't believe who they've got as their Seeker..."

The rest of Slytherin House appeared to feel much the same way as Professor Snape about Harry's appointment to the team. Although no one was really meant to know, the news had leaked out anyway, and the Slytherin reaction varied from scepticism to outrage to a real fear that he'd beat them to the Snitch.

Kat Stormosi represented the sceptical faction. "Come on, Marcus, just because he's famous doesn't mean he's necessarily any good. He grew up among Muggles, he's never even seen a game played before! Gryffindor obviously don't have anyone else and they think that a Seeker who might just worry us is better than no Seeker at all."

Flint was not convinced. "Kat, he's a first year. First years don't get on the team unless they're very good. Like our Marlie. I've heard all sorts about him, apparently he's as good as his father was. As good as Charlie Weasley. Aidan Lynch would have had problems beating him."

Mike clapped his sister on the back. "Well, they may have Potter, but we've got Marlie! And there's no one my sister can't beat to the Snitch! Is there, Marlie?"

Marlie grinned weakly. She privately shared Flint's views - first years did not get on Quidditch teams unless they were very good indeed, and the fact that Gryffindor were willing to play a first year with no prior experience on a broom could only mean that either they were very desperate, or that Harry Potter was very good. She fervently hoped it was the former.

The actual day of the match proved to be a fine, breezy November day. As Marlie followed the rest of her team out to the pitch, she couldn't help noticing that the Gryffindors were sporting a huge banner saying "POTTER FOR PRESIDENT!" with an animated Gryffindor lion. She was reminded of her own first ever Quidditch match, and the banner Deanna had produced for her. That same banner was at the Slytherin end, with it's changing messages alternating between "Go Marlie!" and "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!" Marlie allowed herself to smile. At least their banner had one up on the Gryffindor one.

The teams kicked off and the Quaffle was taken immediately by the Gryffindor Chaser, Angelina Johnson. The Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan was doing the commentary.

"Johnson with the Quaffle for Gryffindor, neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, back to Johnson and - no, Slytherin have taken it, Laetitia Vetinari has possession and off she goes, good flying there, she's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move from Gryffindor Keeper Wood and Gryffindor take possession again - Katie Bell with the Quaffle, nice dive around Summer Montague - OUCH - hit in the head by a Bludger, bet that hurt - Slytherin in possession, Kat Stormosi off towards the goal posts, but she's blocked by a Bludger sent her way by a Gryffindor Beater, nice work, and Johnson back in possession - clear field ahead, she's really flying now - dodges a speeding Bludger from Flint - nearly there now, come on Angelina - Foxworth dives - misses - GOAL FOR GRYFFINDOR!"

The Slytherins howled with rage as Gryffindor cheers rent the air. Marlie swore quietly, and returned to marking Harry carefully. He did a couple of loop-the-loops then began searching again. Marlie was pleased to see how nervous he looked. Good, good, that'll give me the edge, she thought. Reaching for her Snitch necklace, she willed the Snitch to appear.

Lee was commentating again.

"Slytherin in possession. Vetinari ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys and Bell, speeding for the goal - wait a second, was that the Snitch?"

Marlie latched on to it immediately. The Snitch swept past Laetitia's left ear, causing her to drop the Quaffle in fright as two Seekers swept after it in hot pursuit. Marlie grimly forced her broom to its limits, hoping to outdistance Harry. However, a Cleansweep Six was no match for a Nimbus Two Thousand and Flint had been right, Harry *was* an excellent flyer. Marlie could only watch in horror as he overtook her.

WHAM! Flint had noticed that Marlie was getting left behind, and had deliberately blocked Harry's broom. Harry spun off course, clinging on for dear life. Marlie grinned and headed for the Snitch, only to curse again as it disappeared once more.

The Gryffindors shouted with anger and Madam Hooch wasted no time in giving them a penalty which they scored with ease. Marlie went back to marking Harry, dodging a Bludger with ease. Then it happened. Harry's broom suddenly lurched out of control. Marlie gasped. What was happening? Broomsticks, especially Nimbus Two Thousands, simply did not do that. She followed him closely. From the look on his face, he'd obviously lost control of it, as it lurched again.

"Harry!" she shouted. "Harry! Are you alright there?"

Harry looked at her, panic-stricken. "I can't control it! Marlie, help me!" he cried.

"OK, hold on, I'll try and get nearer, get you onto my broom, get a time-out called or something." She tried to get closer, but every time she did, the broom shot further away. It was rising slowly higher, taking him away from the game. Helplessly, Marlie followed.

By now, people were noticing something was up. The crowd were screaming and pointing, and even the other players had stopped what they were doing and watched carefully. Harry's broom was now starting to roll over and over, with Harry clinging on for dear life. It jerked again. Marlie screamed as Harry lost his grip and fell, only just managing to catch it in time. However, he was now hanging on with only one hand. Marlie tried to get nearer again, but the broom just moved away from her. She glanced down. Harry's team mates the Weasley twins had arrived and were trying to do the same thing she had.

"Won't work, Fred!" she shouted to the nearest one. "I've tried, it just keeps moving away." Fred and George tried anyway, but had no more luck than Marlie had. In desperation, they resorted to circling beneath, ready to catch him if he fell.

The broom lurched again, and this time, Harry really did let go. The crowd screamed. The Weasleys frantically zoomed around trying to get beneath him. Marlie felt the world go into slow motion. Instinctively, she reached for her Snitch necklace and clasped it. It was enough. As her Snitch flapped its wings and warmed up in her hand, her mind cleared and she kicked her broom into life. A Cleansweep Six might not beat a Nimbus Two Thousand, but it was by no means an inferior broom. With all her Seeker flying skills at her command, she raced towards Harry, snatched him round the waist and hauled him onto her broom.

Harry clung on to her with relief. "Thank you!" he gasped.

"Any time, Potter." Marlie said casually. "I once fell from a broom during a vital Quidditch match too."

"Really?"

"In my first year. Doesn't matter now though. Let's just get you to the ground, shall we?"

Marlie concentrated on bringing the broom in to land. It was slow and laborious work; this was a racing broom, and it wasn't designed to carry the extra weight of two people. Marlie kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and her mind focused on flying. So focused, that she didn't notice Harry gulping in mid-flight and clapping his hand to his mouth. Finally, she touched the broom down and let Harry slide off it. He immediately coughed into his hand and stared at the shiny gold object that had come out. Marlie's jaw dropped in horror. He had the Snitch.

The Slytherin common room was not a pleasant place to be that night. Virtually the entire house seemed to blame Marlie for what had happened.

"Look, I'm sorry," she protested to Flint. "but what was I supposed to do? He'd fallen off, he could have been killed! I couldn't just leave him there!"

"You could have let his team mates go and help him, while you did your job and got the Snitch for us!" Flint snarled. "Thanks to you, they're now second in the championship! They were the team to beat, and thanks to your little bleeding heart, we didn't do it! We've now got to win both our other games to be in with a chance. Thanks a bleeding bunch, Lovegood!"

"Sorry." she muttered.

"Should bloody hope so too. Don't do it again! Just be grateful you're still on the team; if we had a better reserve Seeker, I'd seriously consider side-lining you!" Flint stormed off in a huff. The rest of the team seemed to agree with him, for they were unusually cold towards Marlie that evening. Sighing, Marlie rejoined her friends, hoping for a warmer reception from them.

She was soon disappointed. Deanna was far from happy with her.

"Marlie Lovegood, you're my friend and I love you, but if you ever, EVER, go to the aid of a Gryffindor player during a game again, I will be left with no choice other than to whip some sense into you!"

"I'm sorry." Marlie said sulkily. "What would you have had me do, let him fall?"

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. "The Weasleys would have helped him. You should have gone for the Snitch while he was preoccupied! What kind of Slytherin are you??"

"Winning isn't everything, Deanna." Luella said gently. She felt rather sorry for Marlie.

"Yes it bloody is!" Deanna snapped. "If we lose the Quidditch and House Cups because of this...! How are we ever going to look the Weasleys in the face again?"

"There's more important things than Quidditch, Deanna." Rianne said absently. "I'm sure we'll make the points total up somehow. That House Cup will be ours again, wait and see."

"You weren't so sanguine when you were screaming at Marlie to get the bloody Snitch this afternoon." Deanna commented. Luella grinned. For all Rianne's apparent disdain for Quidditch, she had a tendency to turn into a raving, psychotic banshee when Slytherin were doing badly.

Marlie felt a little better at this. Deanna's reaction could have been worse, and Luella and Rianne seemed fairly supportive. She almost began to cheer up until someone guaranteed to lower her mood turned up. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Well, well. If it isn't our soon-to-be-ex Seeker. I must say, Lovegood, I'm highly disappointed. I was told you'd never lost the Snitch yet. I do hope the Gryffindors haven't been bribing you to throw matches or anything."

Marlie went crimson and shot to her feet. "I'd never throw a Quidditch match, Malfoy!" she shouted. "Especially not against Gryffindor! Just because I've got an ounce of compassion in me! Not that you'd know anything about that."

"If compassion is going to lose my house Quidditch matches, I think I'm better off without it." Draco drawled.

Something in Marlie snapped at the sight of Draco's smirking face. "Yeah, you would say that, wouldn't you! Your family's always been far too willing to put power before principles, haven't they?"

Draco froze. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean, Lovegood?" he said softly. Luella glanced at Deanna, who looked grimly back at her and reached for her wand.

"Meaning," Marlie said harshly, "that with a gold-digger mother and a Death Eater father, it's hardly surprising you've turned out the way you have."

Draco's face twisted with rage. "Say that again, Lovegood!" he hissed, pulling out his wand.

Deanna reacted fast. "*Expelliarmus!*" Draco's wand flew out of his hand. "I'm warning you, Malfoy." she said threateningly. "Try anything and you'll be sorry."

Draco just looked at her as if she was dirt. He turned back to his cousin with a mocking grin. "You want to watch this one's temper, Lovegood. Or you might get more than you bargained for. Especially if she takes after her father."

Deanna went pale. "What do you know about my father?" she whispered in a stunned voice.

"Did your mother never tell you?" Draco said, oh-so-innocently. Luella clenched her fists. If only she had her wand with her... but it was back in her dorm and of no use whatsoever. Draco grinned and continued. "Your father's a Death Eater, Tyler. Your mother used to sleep around with loads of them. That's why she never told you who he was, probably can't remember herself."

"YOU LYING BASTARD!" Deanna screamed, her face red with rage. She brandished her wand furiously. Rianne and Luella leapt to restrain her.

"Leave him, Deanna, he's not worth it!" Rianne said desperately.

"He's lying, Dee." Luella said quietly. "Your mum never slept around with Death Eaters, of that I am sure. She's an Auror, why would she? Don't let him get to you."

Deanna calmed down. "You're a lying scumbag, Malfoy." she hissed. Draco just grinned cockily and retrieved his wand.

"Be seeing you all. Children of Muggles and Death Eaters. You four make a fine little collection, don't you?" He chuckled evilly and walked off to where Crabbe and Goyle were watching, grins all over their faces. Deanna watched him go, furious.

"I hate him. I hate that smug son of a..." She glared at him, lost for words.

Marlie gave her a hug. "I am so sorry about him, Deanna." she said sadly. "I'm ashamed to even be related to that trash. Ignore him, it's not true. Caitlin Tyler is my mother's best friend, she is not that type of witch."

Deanna acknowledged them. "Thanks, you lot. I'm sure she wouldn't. Not my mum. She wouldn't. But that Malfoy... Oh, he will pay for this." Deanna whispered softly, staring fiercely at Draco. "He'll pay."

Luella however was doing some thinking. Something about Mrs. Tyler and Death Eaters, something important. She thought back to her first year. Doing some less than above board research into the Voldemort Years, she'd come across a Ministry report stating that Mrs. Tyler had been abducted and tortured by Death Eaters back in 1977. She thought hard. Something about that date... She recalled Deanna's birthday, 16th July 1978, and mentally ticked off the months. Seven and a half months into 1978,

and a month of 1977 after the attack which had been in early December. So eight and a half months between Mrs. Tyler's abduction and Deanna being born. Oh hell...

Luella made her excuses and left soon after, saying she needed to go to the library. Her bag slung over her shoulder, she headed straight for Snape's office. Granted, she wasn't certain about him. But a promise was a promise, and she intended to keep it. No way, she thought, no way is Deanna going through what Rianne had to.

She pushed open the classroom door and went straight to the entrance to Snape's office, hammering on the door. No reply. She knocked again, louder this time. Still no answer.

"Sir!" she shouted. "Professor! Answer me, I need to talk to you! It's Luella Martin! Sir? Are you in there?" No response. Luella sighed. Where was he? She thought hard. She checked her watch. Still early. He might be in the staff room still.

Turning, she ran. She had almost reached the staff room when she was intercepted by Professor McGonagall.

"Miss Martin!" Luella stopped in her tracks. McGonagall was not a teacher you played around with.

"What on earth are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in your common room? It's nearly curfew." McGonagall did not look pleased.

"Please, Professor, I'm looking for Professor Snape. He's not in his office, and I was wondering if he might be in the staff room. Is he there, do you know?" Luella smiled her most fetching smile. Professor McGonagall did not relax one bit.

"Professor Snape has gone out for the evening to meet a friend of his. If it is urgent, I can give him a message or deal with it myself."

"No, it's alright, Professor, I just wanted to see him about my Potions homework, I can talk to him in the morning. Sorry to have bothered you." Luella smiled and left, leaving Professor McGonagall looking suspiciously at her. Luella's smile faded as soon as she turned the corner. Of all the nights for Professor Snape to have a social life. Well, she had to hope he hadn't gone far. She fished around in her bag for a parchment and quill, and raced off to the Owlery.

Caitlin patted Snape's arm gently. "Ah well, we always knew Harry took after his father. We can't win them all, Sevi."

This did nothing to allay Snape's bitterness. "Damn him, Caitlin. Every time, every time, something good happens in my life, a Potter has to come along and ruin it. His father ruined my love life without even trying, and now his son is stealing my glory." He glared at her. "Why, Caitlin? Why does everything that family touch turn to gold?"

"Sevi, it's only a Quidditch match. Try not to get too worked up over it, it's not like you've ever cared for the game." Caitlin tried to soothe him.

"It is not just a Quidditch match!" Snape snapped at her. "Not today it wasn't! Would you like to know the exact circumstances in which the Gryffindors achieved their first victory over Slytherin in seven years?"

"Not especially, but I've a feeling you're going to tell me." Caitlin sighed.

"Quirrell. Interfered with Potter's broom in flight. Made it try to throw him off. It worked too. We so very nearly lost him."

Caitlin gasped in horror. "Holy Mother! Is he alright?"

"He's fine. I was performing the counter-charm, which gave him some respite. Unfortunately, Quirrell must have noticed, because someone set fire to my robes and distracted me at a crucial moment. No, I don't know who it was. I hope it was just a student prank, but I fear he may have an accomplice. Whoever it was put the flames out as soon as I broke eye contact and escaped without me seeing them. Their plan worked - no sooner had I looked away than Potter fell off his broom. Fortunately for us all, Miss Lovegood caught him and delivered him safely to the ground. Unfortunately, he caught the Snitch on the way down while she was concentrating on landing."

Caitlin was shocked. "Mel's not going to like this. She's not going to like this at all. Quirrell having an accomplice, that's not good news. Any idea who it could be?"

Snape shook his head. "None whatsoever. He's got no strong bonds with any other staff members, and I don't think there's any students who'd be working with him that closely. Of course, I'm not ruling out him manipulating a student into doing his dirty work for him. I don't think there's many who wouldn't jump at the chance to play a prank on me." He grinned wryly.

"Well, I hope for all our sakes you're right." Caitlin said nervously. A flurry of feathers behind Snape made her look up. A small brown owl had just flown into the pub and was approaching their table. Caitlin recognised it instantly.

"That's Deanna's owl!" she said, surprised.

Snape turned and looked on in astonishment as it dropped a letter next to him. He turned back to Caitlin.

"Do you have any idea what this could be about?" he asked.

Caitlin shook her head. "No. In fact, I can think of no reason on earth why Deanna would be owling you. Open it, what's it say?" She was filled with a sense of foreboding. There was no good reason for Deanna to be owling a teacher she hated, none at all. She hoped all was well, but her instincts were telling her otherwise. Snape opened the letter and raised his eyebrows.

"It's from Luella." he said, intrigued. He scanned the letter. It was not a long one. Caitlin watched as his face changed from being mildly interested to a look of absolute horror. He had gone white and his hands were shaking. Caitlin looked at him, concerned.

"What is it, Severus?" she asked, her voice beginning to tremble. "What's wrong? Is Deanna OK?"

Snape looked at her awkwardly. "I don't know if you should read this." he said cautiously.

"If it concerns my daughter, then I've a right to know about it! *Accio!*" Caitlin snapped. She waved her wand and the letter flew straight to her hands. She unfurled it and read.

Professor,

Well, you told me two years ago to come straight to you if this ever got out. Don't say I don't keep my promises.

There was a confrontation between Marlie and Draco Malfoy in the common room just now over the match today. Deanna stepped in after Marlie insulted the Malfoy family and things started to get nasty. Malfoy let slip that her father was a Death Eater. Deanna's reaction was predictable, and Rianne and me had to hold her back. Malfoy said that Mrs. Tyler used to make a habit of sleeping around with Death Eaters, and probably couldn't remember who Deanna's father was, that's why she'd never told her.

We managed to stop her from killing Malfoy. Everyone seems to think that he was just trying to wind her up, because no one's really discussing it much, or giving it much thought. Everyone knows that Malfoy and company hate Deanna, so no one's that bothered. There's a few whispers though.

Professor, is this linked with the time Mrs. Tyler got abducted by Death Eaters? There's only eight and a half months or so between Deanna being born and the abduction. Because if it is, then it's only a matter of time before Malfoy says something else he shouldn't. I don't want her to get hurt.

I'll be in your classroom until half nine or so, otherwise come and get me out of the common room if it's not too late. If I don't see you tonight, then I'll be at your office at noon tomorrow.

Yours,

Luella Martin

Caitlin laid down the letter in shock. Slowly, she looked at Snape. He had his head buried in his hands, unable to meet her eyes. He lowered his hands and gazed sorrowfully at the table.

"Caitlin, I am so, so sorry." he said quietly. "I know you didn't want her to know the truth. I know you just wanted to put it all behind you." He finally met her eyes. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Not your fault this has got out." Caitlin said shortly. "That Malfoy brat... He has his father's vindictiveness. We had better get over there, find out what's going on. Do you have your broom with you?"

"Right here, I'm not walking long distances on this leg."

"Good. Let's go." Caitlin led the way as they both made for the door.

Luella leapt off Snape's desk as they walked in. She started to see Mrs. Tyler following Snape in.

"Mrs. Tyler! I didn't expect to see you here this soon."

"I Apparated in as soon as Sev- I mean, Professor Snape told me what had happened. Is Deanna alright?"

"She's fine." Luella said quietly. "At the moment." She looked at Mrs. Tyler, wanting to ask her what had really happened that night, but not feeling quite brave enough. Mrs. Tyler guessed what was on her mind.

"Yes, I was attacked and raped by Death Eaters, and yes, Deanna was the result." she said, a little harshly. "No doubt Malfoy Jr. heard something of it from his father. How did you find out?"

"Same time she found out about Branwen Stormosi, I would presume." Snape interrupted. "I made her promise to tell me if there was ever any risk of Deanna finding out about the attack. I am relieved to know that the promise was kept."

Luella shrugged. "I've got my principles. And I don't want Deanna getting hurt." She regarded Snape coolly.

"The only way that's going to happen is if we don't tell her at all; she idolises her father." Mrs. Tyler sighed. She turned to Snape. "This is not going to be easy. Are you sure we can't just keep a lid on it? I'm very good with the old Memory Charms..."

"Caitlin, I am not allowing you to perform Memory Charms on any of my students. Not even Mr. Malfoy." Snape said lazily. "I see no other way, my dear. You will have to tell her."

"Me?" Mrs. Tyler said angrily. "Oh, so you're avoiding all responsibility. As usual."

Snape motioned towards Luella, giving Mrs. Tyler a warning glance. She shut up immediately.

"I think, Miss Martin, you had best go back to your common room while we discuss matters." Snape said calmly, although the look he was giving Mrs. Tyler was anything but. "We will take it from here. Thank you for letting us know."

Luella left the classroom, intrigued now. What exactly had Mrs. Tyler meant by that remark? What responsibilities had Snape ducked out of in the past that he would rather no one else knew about? Was it one of the dark secrets that Mrs. Lovegood had threatened to reveal? Interesting. Very interesting. Her mind full of questions, she returned to her dorm.

Snape watched her go and let out a sigh. He turned on Caitlin.

"Will you watch your mouth, woman! Accuse me and blame me if you will, I daresay I deserve it, but I would much rather you did not do it in front of a student! Particularly not that one!"

Caitlin allowed her pent-up feelings full vent. "What, are you afraid of your past coming to light? I should have guessed why you were so eager for Luella to come to you if this got out. Altruism and concern for my daughter's wellbeing will always come a very poor second to your pride, won't they!"

"That's not true, Caitlin." Snape said, a hint of venom surfacing. "Would you like to have your daughter screaming at you in tears, demanding to know why she had to find it out from Draco Malfoy? Because I have seen a child do that to a parent before and it was not pleasant to watch." He glared at her. "Do you want the entire common room hearing your history? Because I don't!"

"Just 'my' history now is it? Your part is entirely forgotten, I see. How convenient! Convenient that your approach also precludes everyone finding out that you used to rape and torture Aurors for a hobby!"

Snape was on his feet now. "I did not make a hobby out of it!" he screamed at her.

"Oh well, that's good to hear!" Caitlin shouted back. "Great to hear it was just me then!" She crossed her arms and hid her eyes, shaking. Snape had the decency to look ashamed.

"Caitlin, I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry for what I did to you that night." he said quietly. "Believe me, love, if I could change the past, I would. Voldemort made me do it. I swear to you, the moment he led me in to the room and I saw it was you they'd captured, I changed sides. I stopped serving him in that instant. I swear it, Caitlin! I know I have done things in my life that are far from honourable, I know that I am not a man to be proud of, but one thing in me has never changed - I have always cared about you. Always. Even during my committed Death Eater phase, I still cared for you."

Caitlin slowly raised her eyes to his. Snape winced to see them brimming with tears.

"How can you say that to me?" she whispered. "How can you possibly stand there and have the nerve to tell me that despite everything you did, everything you were responsible for, you cared for me? Do you have any idea what it was like for me?" Her voice rose to a shriek. "Do you have any idea how hurt and betrayed I felt to see a man I trusted working for HIM? What I suffered was traumatic enough in itself, but at the hands of someone I thought was a friend..." She wiped her eyes, her voice trailing away. Snape stepped forward, but she backed away.

"Don't touch me, Severus. Just don't come near me. Don't even look at me." Snape stopped dead in his tracks.

"I'm sorry, Caitlin." he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"I can believe it too. You and your wretched principles." Caitlin laughed harshly. "Just tell me why, Severus! Why you went through with it, if you cared about me so much. And why, having done what you did, you didn't just put me out of my misery. It would have been preferable to what I had to live with after." she said bitterly.

"Very well, I owe you that much at least." Snape said softly, leaning back against his desk. "I don't want to excuse my actions - there's nothing on earth could do that. But maybe if you know why... I joined up in 1974, two years after we graduated. Things weren't going well in my personal life, as you well know. I'd just suffered a severe romantic disappointment, the details of which I won't trouble you with further as you already know all about it. Anyway, I was devastated, furious, filled with hate for the whole world and everything in it. And it was in that sort of mood that I happened to encounter my old Potions teacher and House Mistress Lycanthra Lestrage. She saw my potential and recruited me, saying she could give me all the opportunities I wanted for power and revenge. So I accepted. I won't give you a catalogue of all the things I did as a Death Eater, but let's say that I was not a pleasant person to be around. I committed atrocity after atrocity, women, children, Muggles, tortured, humiliated, killed. And I enjoyed it. As a student mediwizard, I was the one responsible for keeping them alive so we could prolong the fun. And that's how my life went. Right up until one fateful day in 1977. Most of our victims were strangers, not human to me. Or people I knew but didn't care for. Then Voldemort summoned me to him with the news he'd captured a young Auror, would I perhaps like a turn with her? She'd already been seen to by some other Death Eaters, and he didn't see why I should miss out on the fun. So I put my Death Eater mask and robes on and followed him to the cells. And saw you."

Snape paused. This was not something he cared to remember. He felt the emotion welling up inside him as what happened next forced itself through his mind.

"I don't know how much you remember about what happened next." he said quietly. "You were pretty badly hurt anyway, and you were only half-conscious. But you were aware enough of what was happening, and you recognised me. I tell you, the look in your eyes nearly killed me. In that one single instant, I knew I could never serve Voldemort again. But I could hardly tell him that, could I? He was watching me closely. So I had to go through with it. He'd have killed us both otherwise. I thought, if I pretend to go along with this, maybe I can get you out of here later. Caitlin, he

would have killed you, and me too if I'd refused. Please believe me when I say I'm sorry. If I could have avoided it I would." He gazed at her desperately.

Caitlin gazed back at him disdainfully. "Pitiful, but believable. You never were that fond of heroic deeds."

Snape went red, anger creeping back in. "What would you have had me do, get us both killed? If you want dramatic stands against evil, noble and heroic deeds, making the ultimate sacrifice rather than hurt a friend, hang around with Gryffindors! I am a Slytherin, Caitlin, Slytherin like you. And when a friend of mine is in trouble, I do the Slytherin thing and accept shame if that is what it takes to salvage the situation. Caitlin, I'll never be a hero. I'm not that kind of man. Decency and fairness never came easily to me. I don't deal in moral absolutes, I just look out for my friends and deal with the rest of the world as it comes. I didn't save you or change sides because what I did to you was wrong, I did it because you were my friend and I couldn't live with myself after seeing you hurt, after knowing what I'd done to you. I'm a Slytherin, Caitlin, with all that implies. If you don't like that, don't spend time with me. I may not go in for noble gestures, but I did save your life. Dying in each others' arms is all very romantic, but at the end of the day it's better to live. Had it not been for me, you would not be here now. Deanna would not be here now." He looked at her coldly.

Caitlin laughed hollowly. "Yes, I suppose you are right. Deanna owes you her life in more ways than one. Seeing as we're on this subject, why don't you tell me how you got me out of there? I seem to remember losing consciousness at the critical moment."

"Easy enough. I asked Voldemort if I could retain you for my experiments. He seemed happy enough to allow it. I dosed you with a potion I'd just invented, called Sleep of the Phoenix. It simulates death in the subject. There's really no way of telling the difference between it's effects and real death. Neat little potion, I'm rather proud of it. Anyway, I gave it to you, and told Voldemort you'd died before I could do anything else. I dumped you in a safe place far away from our headquarters where you wouldn't be found, Transfigured you into an innocuous rock and left you there until I could come back for you. Which I did, the following day. Turned you back, gave you the antidote, started healing you. Which is when you woke up. You know the rest."

"Cute plan." Caitlin said mirthlessly. "Very cute. As long as I went into hiding, I was safe forever. Voldemort wouldn't bother looking for a dead woman, after all. I applaud your way of thinking. I haven't forgiven you entirely, but shall we say I'm a little more understanding?"

"I don't deserve forgiveness." Snape said shortly. "What I did to you was unforgivable. I let you down and betrayed you. I know I'll never make it up to you, but if there's anything I can do...."

"There's nothing." Caitlin said sharply, more so than she'd intended. The pain in his eyes caused her to soften a little. "Nothing you can do for me, anyway. But there is... another."

"Who?" Snape asked guardedly.

"You know who. Don't tell me you hadn't realised?" Caitlin said, amused.

Snape flushed. "Realised what?" he said, hoping Caitlin didn't mean what he thought she did.

"Deanna, of course. 16th July 1978 is her birthday. Need I spell it out?"

He sighed. "No, there's no need for that. I'm quite capable of simple arithmetic, Caitlin. I knew whose she was the first time I laid eyes on her at her Sorting. Seeing her being placed in Slytherin and checking on her birthdate merely confirmed it. Caitlin," he gazed at her with excruciating tenderness, "she's mine, isn't she?"

"Of course she is, where else do you think she got her pride, sharp tongue, and general all-round touchiness from? Not to mention those eyes. No one else I know has eyes like that. Come on, Severus. She looks so much like you, it's astonishing no one else has picked up on it yet. Congratulations, Sevi, you're a father." Caitlin grinned sardonically. She watched with amusement as the full implications of what she'd just said dawned on Snape.

"I'm a father?" he repeated, dazed. Caitlin nodded. Snape's eyes lit up and he suddenly found himself unable to stop grinning. "I'm a father!" He gazed at Caitlin, eyes brimming with happiness. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe it, this is what I've always wanted! I mean... are you sure?"

"Positive. But don't get carried away. If you went into the Nest now and told Deanna you were her father, she'd run screaming from the room. She has this image of her father being a John Travolta lookalike with the mind of Hercule Poirot and the suaveness and style of Sean Connery. No mere mortal could ever live up to that. You will have to be subtle about winning her over."

"Subtle is my middle name. I've always liked challenging women." Snape grinned.

Caitlin smiled coolly. "Well, you'll have your work cut out with my daughter. Here it is then, Sevi. Your mission, if you choose to accept it. Earn my daughter's love and respect. Be a father to be proud of. The day she freely admits that you're her father and she couldn't wish for better, that's the day you'll finally have my full forgiveness. What do you say?"

"It will be a pleasure, Caitlin." Snape said, smiling the first genuine smile for a long time. However, it soon changed back to his usual twisted grin. "I believe the first step is to get Deanna used to the idea of her father being only human. And the most effective way to do that is for you to acquaint her with the circumstances of her conception. Don't you agree, Caitlin?"

Caitlin's smile faded instantly. "You bastard, Severus." she said miserably. "How do you always do this to me? Get me to go along with these things?"

Snape patted her on the back. "That's the spirit, Caitlin. Tomorrow's Sunday, so maybe you can do it then, while she has no classes. I'll let you have somewhere private to talk if necessary."

Caitlin gritted her teeth. "All right. But you may have cause to regret this."

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Chapter Six In A Broken Dream

The general mood of Slytherin House had not improved much the following morning. Breakfast was a distinctly tense affair, with everyone except Luella, Rianne and Deanna speaking to Marlie only when they had to. Draco was the only one who was actually in a good mood - he'd started cracking jokes about how the Gryffindors were getting a wide-mouthed tree frog as their next Seeker. This did not go down well with the other Slytherins, who did not particularly want to be reminded of their first Quidditch defeat in seven years. After Flint had told him that if he made one more frog remark he'd be turned into one, Draco had shut up. He was still giving Marlie evil grins though.

"Look at him." Deanna hissed. "He thinks he's it! Like to see him be Seeker one of these days, see how good he is. Little sneak."

"Don't." Marlie said miserably. "He's a good flier. If we don't win the Quidditch Cup this year, I could get dropped from the team."

"It won't come to that, will it?" Luella said, worried. "Marlie, you're the best in the school. Everyone knows that. Malfoy's got nothing on you."

"I wish I shared your confidence." Marlie said morosely.

They were interrupted by the looming figure of Professor Snape. Marlie squeaked in terror and busied herself with her cereal. Luella backed away a little, while Deanna just gazed back at him coldly. Only Rianne maintained her composure.

"Is there something the matter, sir?" she asked curiously.

Snape did not immediately reply. He gazed into Deanna's eyes long and hard, an unfathomable look in his eyes. Deanna squirmed uncomfortably, but did not look away.

"Miss Tyler, I need to see you in my office immediately after breakfast. It's quite important." Snape said. Luella, noting that Snape did not sound quite all there, as if he was thinking about something else entirely, realised what it must be about. Snape gazed at Deanna for a few moments more before turning on his heel and returning to the teachers' table.

Rianne looked bemusedly at Deanna. "What was that all about?" she said, puzzled.

Marlie, rather glad that yesterday's game had not been mentioned, grinned at Deanna. "What've you done now, mate?"

Deanna shook her head, as confused as they were. "Nothing! I mean, I've got no homework overdue, my grades are OK, my last Potions assignment wasn't too bad, and I've been behaving myself. No fights, no pranks, nothing. I mean, there was last night's little confrontation, but it was only words exchanged, no magic or anything. So why the hell he wants to see me, I have no idea."

Rianne was giving Snape concerned looks. "Was it me, or did he seem really spaced out back then? He was staring at you like you'd waltzed in naked and painted yourself green while singing 'I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep'."

Deanna choked on her orange juice. She looked at Rianne with mock sternness. "I wouldn't know anything about songs like that, Ri. Seriously though, he was looking at me rather oddly. Is he on drugs or something? What do you think, Lu?"

Luella started. She had a fairly good idea what was troubling Snape, but could hardly tell Deanna that. "Maybe he's having woman trouble." she said, hastily distracting attention from herself.

Marlie and Deanna burst out laughing. Rianne looked distinctly annoyed.

"Woman trouble!" Marlie howled. "Him! Can you believe that?"

Deanna shook her head, wiping her eyes. "What woman in her right mind would fancy Snape?"

"Maybe that's the trouble!" Marlie giggled. Rianne stepped in to defend him.

"Will you two cut that out? Professor Snape's private life is no one's business but his own." Rianne snapped. "I'm sure he's just out of sorts."

"He's hungover. Spent last night drowning his sorrows after yesterday." Deanna commented wryly.

Marlie's smile evaporated. "Shut up Tyler." she muttered. Deanna immediately looked contrite.

"Sorry, Marls. Didn't mean to remind you." she said guiltily. She got up. "I'd better go and find out what he wants, anyway. See you lot around."

Luella got to her feet. "I'll come with you. Catch you two back at the Nest." She followed Deanna out.

Deanna eyed her curiously. "Lu, much as I appreciate the support, I very much doubt Snape wants you along as well. Or he'd surely have invited you."

"Don't worry, I've got no intention of gatecrashing. Just wanted to wish you luck and..." she hesitated. Deanna raised an eyebrow.

"And what?"

"Just that if it goes badly, I want you to know I'm here for you." Luella said quietly. She patted Deanna's arm gently and looked at her friend for a bit. Impulsively, she hugged her. Deanna looked at her in surprise.

"Lu, what's come over you? Anyone would think I was going to the electric chair from the way you're acting."

Luella tried to smile. "Well, you know. What with it being Snape and all. I doubt it's going to be a friendly chat."

Deanna waved her off. "You worry too much, Lu. What's the worst that could happen? Expulsion and he won't do that, I've done nothing wrong. Cheer up, Lu. I'll be fine." Deanna gave her trademark grin, before sauntering off towards the dungeons and Snape's office. Luella watched her go with a heavy heart. She doubted she'd see Deanna that carefree again for a long time.

Deanna entered Snape's classroom in a relatively good mood. She still had no idea what he wanted to see her about, but she'd done nothing wrong so she wasn't too concerned. She found Snape sitting at his desk staring into space, a sombre look on his face. Deanna's cheery mood began to evaporate. Snape didn't look angry, but he did have that same troubled look that Luella had had. She began to worry. Had something terrible happened? She immediately thought of her mother. Had something happened to her? Had one of her missions gone wrong? Was she dead, or perhaps worse, a captive of some Dark Mage? Deanna felt her insides go numb at the mere thought.

"Sir?" she asked tentatively. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Snape looked up, startled. He did not relax on seeing her, although he did try and smile.

"Ah yes, Miss Tyler. Take a seat." He seemed nervous and unsure of what to say. Deanna stiffened. Snape, unsure of himself? This could only mean bad news. Very bad news.

"Oh gods." she whispered. "Is she all right? What's happened to her? What's happened?!" Her voice rose almost to a scream. Snape started.

"Who?" he asked.

"My mother!" Deanna said desperately. "Please tell me she's all right!"

Snape's expression softened at this. "She's fine." he said gently. "You need have no worries on that score. In fact, not only is she alive and well..." He got up and went to his office door and opened it. "She's right here. Caitlin!"

Caitlin Tyler stepped nervously into the room. She gave Deanna a weak smile. "Hello dear."

Deanna got up and ran over to her, hugging her. "Oh thank the gods! I thought something awful had happened to you."

Caitlin returned the hug, giving Snape an anguished look. "Not since you last saw me, sweetheart." she said tenderly.

Snape coughed quietly. "Deanna, your mother wants to discuss some family business with you, so I'll let you both have some privacy. I'll be in my office if you need me." He gathered up a pile of essays to be marked and headed out, giving them both a sympathetic look of support as he left. Deanna looked quizzically at her mother.

"Family business? What sort of family business? Mum, you're the only family I've got left. Aren't you?"

Caitlin sighed. This was not going to be easy. "I gather one of your housemates said a few things about your father last night."

Deanna gave her a strange look. "He might have done. Why?"

Caitlin gathered her courage and continued. "I hear he said your father was a Death Eater."

Deanna smiled. "Listen Mum, it was Draco Malfoy, he's always saying cruel things to people. He gets a kick out of it. You don't want to take him seriously, he's always making stuff up." She looked closely at her mother. "He *was* making it up, wasn't he?"

Caitlin didn't answer immediately. When she did, it was with her this-is-very-serious voice.

"Deanna, up until now I've never said anything to you about your father. I didn't think you were old enough to take it, and I'm still not totally sure. But I don't really have any choice. There's a real risk you could hear it from a schoolmate, and I'd rather spare you that. I'm telling you now because I don't want you knowing any other way."

Deanna fought this strange urge to be sick. "Mum... please... please don't tell me this. Please don't." she whispered.

Caitlin looked sorrowfully at her daughter. "I'm sorry, Deanna. But you had to know sooner or later. Malfoy was right, you were fathered by a Death Eater." She felt herself go limp with relief. There, it was out at last.

Deanna stared at her mother in horror. "No... no, it can't be. It can't be true. Mum, you didn't have an affair with a Death Eater, please tell me you didn't!"

Caitlin laughed mirthlessly. "No, child, I didn't. I was captured by them. I was their prisoner. And you know what usually happens to beautiful women when they're completely in the power of evil men."

Deanna couldn't take it in. "They... forced you?" Caitlin nodded. Deanna just stared in shock. Caitlin watched her silently. At length, Deanna spoke.

"Why, Mum?" she whispered. "Why did you let me believe he was a good man, a fighter on our side? Do you know how much I idolised him? How much time I spent wondering who he was, what he was like, what I'd say to him if I ever met him? I loved him so much, Mum! I wanted to be like him, I wanted to impress him, I wanted to be the sort of daughter he'd love and admire. That's why I wanted to be an Auror, so I could do brave and heroic things that he'd respect me for." Deanna choked on the words. "And you're telling me he was a Death Eater? And not only that, he didn't even have any affection for you? That far from being a martyr, he's the lowest of the low? Why didn't you tell me?" she howled, bursting into tears.

Caitlin put her arms around her. "I'm so sorry, love. But what was I to tell you? How could I possibly explain to a three year old child that she resulted from an act of violence? I couldn't do it to you. Instead, I just told you as little as I could get away with, and resolved to tell you when you were old enough to understand. Of course, I didn't think Lucius Malfoy's son would force it on me this soon; I was going to wait until you were sixteen or so. But if Draco knows something, then it's best for me to tell you before he does. Deanna, I'm sorry. I know how you felt about your father. I hope you understand."

Deanna's sobs had quietened down. "I thought he was so wonderful, Mum." she whispered. "I thought how special and amazing he must have been, to have made you fall in love with him. And now I can't think that any more." She dried her eyes and looked up. "It explains everything. Why Dexter Crabbe was so interested in my birthday and who my mother was. Why Malfoy and friends have been giving me those snide looks all term. Gods, any of them could be my half-siblings." She looked revolted at the thought. "Mum, do you have any idea who he might be? I mean, I suppose it wasn't just one, was it?"

"Well, I can't say for certain, but looking at how you've turned out, I've a fair idea."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Not yet. You don't need to know now. When you're older and wiser. If I told you now, you'd want to murder him."

"So he's alive then?" Deanna said in wonder.

"Yes, he's alive."

"In Azkaban?"

"No."

"So he's out there somewhere even now!" Deanna gasped. Caitlin nodded. Deanna thought for a moment and a dawning look of horror spread across her face. "Mum. Oh Mum. It's not..." Caitlin waited patiently while Deanna braced herself. "It's not Malfoy's dad, is it?"

Caitlin burst out laughing. "Oh Deanna. Of course it's not! Do you look like a Malfoy?"

"Well, no. But I've got to check these things." Deanna said obstinately. "Gods, what a horrible thought. Sharing genes with Malfoy. Gag. Don't know how Marlie lives with herself sometimes. At least it's Auntie Mel's genes she shares with him." Deanna seemed to cheer up at the news she wasn't related to the Malfoys in any way. Caitlin breathed a private sigh of relief. Deanna was taking this much better than she'd thought.

Professor Snape edged nervously back into the room.

"Is everything all right in here?" he asked gently. Caitlin nodded.

"I'd say we were about done." she said quietly. Snape nodded mutely and glanced at Deanna. She met his eyes with typically Slytherin composure. Seemingly reassured, he turned back to Caitlin.

"Anything I can do for you, Caitlin, or are you leaving us now?"

"I'd better go, I think." She turned to Deanna. "Will you be OK?" Deanna nodded dumbly. "Well, if you need to talk, owl me, I'll come and see you if I can. Promise."

"Thanks." Deanna whispered. She hugged her mother goodbye as she prepared to leave. Caitlin kissed her on the cheek and left. Snape stayed behind briefly to talk to Deanna.

"I have to see your mother back to Hogsmeade so she can Apparate home. But should you require assistance that your friends cannot provide, I will be in my office for most of the day."

"Thank you." Deanna said, barely aware of what he was saying. She glanced up and found herself looking straight into his eyes. She was amazed to see there, instead of the usual cold cynicism, feelings of sorrow, warmth and tenderness. She quickly looked away.

Snape held the door open for her and Deanna went out. She heard the door close behind her, and footsteps heading in the other direction and guessed Snape must be following her mother out, but didn't really care. Wrapping her cloak about her, she walked swiftly back to the Nest, desperately trying to hold back the tears.

Luella, Marlie and Rianne looked up as Deanna entered the common room. Not pausing to look at them, she walked swiftly through it and into the corridor leading to their dorm.

"Uh oh." Marlie said quietly. "That didn't look good."

Luella got to her feet. "I'd better go and see how she is. You two stay here, I'll let you know how it goes." She followed Deanna out.

Deanna was lying face down on her bed, crying quietly to herself and cuddling Luella's cat Sooty. She looked up as Luella came in.

Luella closed the door behind her. She sat down next to her friend, and stroked her cheek gently.

"Well? What happened?"

Deanna wiped away her tears and struggled to compose herself. It was a while before she was able to speak.

"It's true. What Malfoy said. About my father. He was a Death Eater, Lu. Snape found out what had happened somehow and told Mum. She came up here this morning and told me. My father's a Death Eater. They captured her and..." Deanna's voice broke up and she found she couldn't continue. Luella held her silently. At length, Deanna recovered herself.

"I've been living a lie, Lu. My whole entire life has been based on a complete and utter lie." Deanna whispered. "I thought my father was a good, honourable man who died fighting for what he believed in. Now I find out he's scum. An evil bastard who raped and tortured my mum!" She broke down in tears again. Luella didn't say anything, just hugged her friend and soothed her quietly.

"I share half my genes with a murdering criminal, Lu!" Deanna wept. "I always thought that with a heroic dad, whoever he was, and a mum like mine, I'd turn out well, I'd be a top Auror, fighter for good. Now I just don't know. What if I end up like that, Lu? What if I end up as a Dark witch?"

"You won't." Luella said fiercely. "You're one of the most loyal, selfless people I know. You've got honour and integrity and all those things everyone says we should have. Come on! For thirteen years, you've been brought up to know what Dark mages are and that they're evil. That's got to count for something. You're no Dark witch."

Deanna shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "How the hell do you know? You don't know everything about me. I don't know everything about me. I don't know who I am anymore! How do I know I won't start going down that route without even knowing it? How do I know I'm not the next Lord Voldemort waiting to happen?"

"You know it because you've already been given the chance to be that. Remember our first year?" Luella said firmly. "You pretended to be into the Dark Arts in order to incriminate Crabbe so we could get him punished. They offered to teach you Dark

Magic, didn't they? Promised you power and all sorts of things if you stuck with them. But you turned it down. You hung around with them just long enough to get the confession you needed and then you turned them in. Would a Dark witch have done that?"

Deanna was not convinced. "You didn't see me when I was hanging around them. Didn't see me saying horrible things about people behind their backs. Didn't see me helping them play cruel practical jokes on other students. You didn't hear what I said about you."

"Why, what did you say about me?" Luella asked, curious.

Deanna couldn't speak for a moment. "I called you a, a..." She swallowed as if she found the word difficult to say out loud. "I called you Mudblood, Lu!" She buried her head in her hands.

Luella looked confused. "Mudblood? What on earth does that mean?"

"It's a term some pure-bloods use for Muggle-borns and half-bloods. It's a horrible word, Lu, it's really bad. The worst thing you could call anyone, and I used it about my best friend!" Deanna sobbed. "I'm so sorry, can you ever forgive me?"

"Hey. You had your reasons. You were a spy, remember?" Luella said gently. "You did what you had to do."

"I didn't have to be so convincing though, did I? Didn't have to be such a bitch. And you know what? I enjoyed it too, in a twisted kind of way. Enjoyed having an excuse to act that badly. Part of me wanted to keep it permanent. Part of me saw you and Ri having such a cool time together without me and just thought 'Screw you two, I'll be with these guys, they like me.' I was really horrible, and I liked it!" Deanna cried.

"Yeah, and look at you now! Guilty and ashamed as hell about it, and begging my forgiveness. Do you really think Malfoy, say, would be looking back two years later and begging forgiveness for everything he'd done? Would he heck as like! And that's the difference, Dee. You're sorry. He wouldn't be. You've got a conscience. He hasn't. OK, so your dad was a Death Eater. But your mum's an Auror. You've got the potential to be both. And you can choose which parent you take after. You're not fated to be evil, you know!"

"I hope you're right, mate." Deanna said quietly, drying her eyes. She looked up at Luella. "Are you sure you're not angry at me for what I called you? Because it truly is the worst thing to call anybody."

"No. I'm not angry. You did what you had to. And I don't really have the heart to be angry with you at the moment. Actually, I'm rather glad you admitted that, it makes this bit a lot easier. See, I've been hiding something from you as well."

"Yeah? What would that be then?" Deanna asked, curiously. Luella squirmed uneasily.

"Not really sure how to tell you this, mate, but here goes. The reason it took less than twenty four hours for Snape and your mum to react to last night is because I told Snape what had happened, and he got your mum up here almost at once, don't ask me how. And the reason I went straight to him is because..." She swallowed. "Because I already knew about your dad. I read the Ministry report in the library while Marlie and me were looking for news about Rianne's mum. I told Snape about it after he'd finished lecturing me, and he made me promise not to tell anyone about it, and to come to him if you ever found out. Didn't actually know you'd been conceived then until last night. After Malfoy said what he did, I worked out the dates and realised. Deanna, I'm sorry I kept it from you, I really am!"

Deanna was staring at her open-mouthed. "You knew? You *knew*? You knew my father was a Death Eater and you didn't tell me?" She stared incredulously at Luella.

"I'm sorry, Dee!" Luella said desperately. "I really am. But I knew you'd be really upset when you found out, and I didn't want you going through what Rianne had. I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?!" Deanna screamed. "You didn't think it worth mentioning to me that I'm a Death Eater's child, and you're *sorry*?"

"I'm sorry!" Luella wept. "Snape made me promise to keep it secret. I'm really sorry!"

"Oh, so you thought you'd tell Snape before me! Well, that's wonderful, knowing he's higher on your list of priorities than I am. Really wonderful, Lu!"

Luella felt her own anger begin to rise. "Oh, so you'd have had me be responsible for two of my friends traumatised beyond belief, would you? I've already seen Rianne lose it completely over her mother being a Death Eater. I didn't want to see you go through the same thing. Now, I'm sorry if caring for my best mate makes me a bad person, but evidently I was wrong!"

"Worked well there, didn't it?" Deanna remarked sourly. "I found out anyway, and now you've got to explain why you hid it from me!"

"Look, Deanna, I'm not going to argue anymore. You think what you like of me." Luella snapped. "But at least you found out from your mum. At least you've been spared the indignity of Malfoy shouting it for the whole of Slytherin House to hear."

A small cough came from behind her. Both girls turned from shouting at each other to the open door. Marlie was standing there, with Rianne gazing over her shoulder.

"Er... are we interrupting anything?" Marlie said quietly. "Just... we thought we'd come and see what was going on."

Deanna and Luella just looked at the two of them for a moment. Deanna broke the silence. "How much have you heard?" she demanded.

"Enough." Rianne said quietly. She stepped into the room, walked straight over to Deanna and hugged her. Deanna was too surprised to react at first, but she recovered herself and returned the hug. Marlie went over to Luella, closing the door.

"Her dad's a Death Eater?" she asked incredulously.

Luella nodded.

Marlie seemed unable to take it in. "But... her mum's an Auror, she would hardly have gone out with one of them, surely?"

"She didn't. She was taken prisoner by them and didn't have a lot of choice in the matter." Luella said grimly.

Marlie covered her mouth in horror. "Oh my god, Lu, that's really bad." she gasped. She turned to Deanna. "Are you all right?"

Deanna let go of Rianne. She didn't answer, just held out her arms. Marlie, without a word, reached out and held her, before leading her to Luella's bed and sitting down with her. Rianne sat on her other side, while Luella sat down on Marlie's bed, which was next to it.

"Well, since Luella knows, I might as well let you two in on the thing as well." Deanna said, smiling mirthlessly. She proceeded to explain what had happened that morning.

Marlie listened in shock, her mouth open wide. Rianne just nodded grimly, understanding only too well. When Deanna finished, it was Marlie who was first to speak, turning to Luella.

"Lu, I can't believe you never told me! I mean, I was there at the time, right next to you when you found out!"

"Marlie, use your logic." Luella said wearily. "You and Deanna weren't speaking at the time, remember? I could hardly tell you, of all people. Who knows what you might have done? Anyway, I only found out that she was abducted. Didn't think to work the dates out until Malfoy brought it up."

"Give me some credit, please!" Marlie snapped. "I'm not completely heartless, I wouldn't have just dumped it on her like that. Besides, we had Rianne to deal with, I think that would have put me off anything."

"Good thing too, we didn't need both of us going nuts." Rianne interrupted. She turned back to Deanna. "How are you feeling now?"

"Better. Not as weepy. Just not able to take it in. Angry, very angry. I want to find the bastard and murder him for what he did to my mum." Deanna looked furious.

"Can't say I blame you." Rianne said, a trace of amusement flickering around her lips.

"Only thing that's stopping me is the thought of Azkaban. And that I don't know who he is. And that he's probably much stronger than I am. And..." She hesitated. "I don't want to end up like him." she said quietly.

Rianne and Luella exchanged looks of sympathy. Marlie however was rather less understanding.

"You won't." she said dismissively. "It's not in your nature. You're too honest. You've got too much integrity. You risked your life and your reputation saving me from Sleeping Death, and you very nearly lost both. Death Eater, my arse. You're not one and you'll never be one! Here." She reached behind her neck and removed her Snitch necklace. "Take this. Wear it for a bit. Keep it as long as you need it. A reminder of what you did. A reminder that you were in my soul for a bit. Having had you there, I know you pretty well, and you are no Death Eater. I'm telling you, if you were really evil, you wouldn't be able to wear it, it wouldn't let you." She fastened it around Deanna's neck. Sure enough, the Snitch did not react at all. Deanna held it in awe.

"Thank you." she whispered. She tucked it underneath her robes and got up, a determined look on her face. "Come on, let's go. It's lunchtime. I need to eat."

Food seemed to work wonders for Deanna's mood. Soon, she was almost back to normal. Almost. Luella could detect the cold, seething anger burning dully in her eyes even if Rianne and Marlie couldn't. She glanced at Snape. He kept giving Deanna looks of concern. As Luella watched him, he glanced in her direction. She gave him a quick smile of solidarity, which he returned before looking back at Deanna.

"Good to see you've cheered up a bit, DT." Marlie commented. "I'm glad it's not getting you down too much."

Deanna shrugged. "Well, you know. It's not like I ever knew him after all. I'll get over it. All I've lost are my dreams."

"They can be the worst thing to lose." Luella said quietly.

"Very profound." Deanna remarked coolly. "Nah, I'll be all right. He's not worth mourning, really. Hey, thanks for lending me your Snitch, by the way, Marlie. I appreciate it."

"Any time." Marlie grinned. "It goes nuts if anyone who means me harm goes near it or touches it. Does it around Malfoy all the time. Thought it might reassure you if it stayed normal around you."

"Well, it's fine at the moment. Warm, if anything. Comforting."

"Yeah, it does that if I'm upset, or anyone close to me is. Went really warm this morning, gave me this comforting tingling feeling all over. That's how I knew you weren't OK. And why we came to find you both. I just didn't feel right sitting back while you were in that bad a state." Marlie smiled.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't. Thank you. All of you. Yes, Lu, even you." Deanna squirmed a little. "Lu, I'm sorry I shouted at you. I know you were just doing the right thing. For what it's worth, I'm glad Mum told me herself. At least I don't hate her for it. Thanks, Lu. Friends again?"

"Friends." Luella said, relieved. "I'm glad you don't hate your mum."

"At least she had the guts to tell you." Rianne said bitterly. "My father didn't."

"Not her fault." Deanna said. "I don't blame her, I blame him! I wish she'd told me who he was, I'd go and punch his lights out! I mean, how dare he do that to my mother! Bastard!"

"Deanna, you would not win a fight against a full-grown wizard, especially one who'd been a Death Eater." Marlie pointed out. "Wait until you're an Auror, then find out who he is and get him sent down. Revenge is best served cold and all that."

Deanna calmed down. "Yes, yes you're right. No hurry. He's waited thirteen years, he can wait a few more. Just got to find out who he is now." She looked thoughtful. "You know, the library'll have all the old records, we could go through them and get some names."

"Yeah, in the Restricted Section. The Restricted Section, which thanks to you, we're not allowed in until we're in the fifth year." Marlie snapped irritably.

"Rianne is though, aren't you, Ri?" Deanna asked sweetly. Rianne, however, was having none of it.

"Don't even think about it, Tyler." she said firmly. "I am not asking for permission to visit the Restricted Section just so you can pursue some private vendetta. No. And don't go all hurt and reproachful on me. I'm not doing it!"

Deanna shrugged. "OK, I didn't really expect you to. And I'm sure Snape would find out somehow." She looked up at Snape, who was eating quietly and not paying any attention to her at that moment, just gazing off into space. "What's up with him anyhow? He's been acting really strangely."

"Do you blame him?" Rianne asked. "He probably thought it was going to escalate into a huge traumatic crisis like it did for me."

Deanna shook her head. "I don't know, I get the feeling it's more than that. He keeps staring off into space, then looking at me really oddly."

"Oddly how?" Rianne asked, intrigued.

"I don't know. Sort of like he's concerned about me. But there's more to it, like he just can't take his eyes off me. I don't know, it's weird. And you should have seen the way he looked at me after Mum left. Just for a bit. He looked... as if he cared about me." Deanna looked freaked out at the thought.

Marlie giggled. "Oooh! Sounds like Snapey likes you! Maybe he's got a crush on you!"

"AAGH!" Deanna pushed her food away, revolted. "Marlie! I'm trying to eat! Gods, that's horrible. He can't have, I'm only thirteen. Ack. Bloody hell, Lovegood, that's almost as traumatic as finding out my dad was a Death Eater."

"Sorry." Marlie grinned, not looking sorry in the slightest.

Luella however, looked thoughtful. Deanna was right, Snape was acting very strangely. He'd been staring at Deanna like he'd seen a ghost. She was reminded of his reaction on first hearing that she knew about the attack on Mrs. Tyler. He'd been very strongly affected, as if he hadn't wanted to be reminded about it. Mrs. Tyler's own words came back to her, that Snape was an old schoolfriend she'd lost contact with during the Troubles. How friendly had they been, Luella wondered. She thought back again. The dominant emotion she'd sensed in Snape that night had been not anger, not pain, not sadness, although they'd all been there, but guilt. But Snape isn't a Death Eater, surely! she thought, disbelieving. They wouldn't let an ex-Death Eater teach at Hogwarts. And he wasn't involved in the attack on Mrs. Tyler, was he? And yet... She looked hard at Snape. Then back to Deanna, who was explaining to Marlie about how to do their Charms homework. Deanna was irritably fingering her hair, which she hadn't washed that morning and as a result was far from it's best, limp and a little greasy. She glanced up at Luella and grinned, her black eyes shining. Luella smiled weakly back. She looked back at Snape. No need to even bother examining his hair; it was obviously the same high-maintenance sort that Deanna had, and Snape put far less effort into maintaining it. And then there were those eyes... They were the same colour, but without any of Deanna's warmth. Luella shivered. It shouldn't be true, it couldn't be, but it did look disturbingly accurate. No doubt about it, there was a definite resemblance. But Snape surely wasn't a Death Eater? Surely not. And hadn't he and Mrs. Tyler been friends? It was a mystery. And one she had to know the answer to. Asking Snape was a non-starter, but she did have to know. Which left just one other person...

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Chapter Seven Behind The Mask

Luella had a tough time concentrating on her homework that night. All sorts of thoughts involving Deanna, Snape and Mrs. Tyler were swimming around her mind. Was it true or wasn't it? Sighing, she laid aside her quill. Looking up, she noticed Deanna and Rianne in heated conversation.

"I don't care, I'm going to ask him!" Deanna hissed. "I need to know!"

"What makes you think he'll tell you?" Rianne whispered back. "What makes you think he knows?"

"They knew each other before, didn't they? She might have confided in him or something. Worst that can happen is he'll tell me to go away and stop bothering him."

"What are you two whispering about?" Luella asked, curious. They looked at each other then at her. "Deanna wants to ask Professor Snape if he knows who her father is." Rianne informed her.

Luella tried not to react. "Why?" she asked, trying to keep her voice level.

Deanna shrugged. "Why not? They were at school together, she might have said something to him. At the very least he may have a few ideas."

"That might not be such a good idea." Luella said, wondering how to talk Deanna out of it without giving anything away.

"Why not? Worst he can do is say no." Deanna raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know, I just... don't trust him, that's all."

Rianne looked surprised. "Why on earth not? He's a teacher. And think of all the times he's helped us before. He helped save Marlie. He supported us when we were trying to get Dexter Crabbe caught. He was most understanding to me when I found out about my mum. Snape's all right. I know he's rather less than pleasant most of the time, but still..."

"You worry too much, mate." Deanna said. "He seemed sympathetic enough this morning. I'm going to ask. See you lot later. I'll let you know how it goes."

Luella watched her go with foreboding. Snape might be all right now, but who knew what secrets his past held? She only hoped Snape had enough self-control to keep them that way.

Deanna knocked on Snape's door and pushed it open. Snape was at his desk, marking. He glanced up to see who his visitor was and froze. Deanna stepped nervously forward and sat down.

"Miss Tyler?" Snape said edgily. "How are you feeling now?"

"I've felt worse." Deanna said quietly. "Sir, I was wondering..." She fidgeted, unsure how to say it. "I was wondering, did my mother tell you..." She paused, her nerves fighting a battle with her willpower over whether to go through with it.

"Tell me what?" Snape asked, looking almost as worried as she felt.

"Well, she told me that you two knew each other at school, and I thought she might have said something to you..." she faltered.

"What about?" Snape asked sharply, more so than he'd really meant to be.

Deanna gulped. Nothing for it now. "Sir, do you know who my father is?"

She was completely unprepared for his reaction. He went pale and had to fight to stop trembling. Deanna was non-plussed. Professor Snape, the very essence of self-containment, afraid?

"What makes you ask that?" he said, shaking himself and appearing to calm down.

"Why do you think?" said Deanna quietly. "I want to know. I want his name, who he is, where he lives, what he looks like, everything. I want to know everything about him, so that I can track him down, find him, and make him pay for what he's done to us. I want him to pay, I want him to know what Mum and I have been through because of what he did to her! I want him to feel as much pain as we have, and more! I want the bastard dead!" She pounded his desk in fury. Snape seemed shocked by her anger.

"Miss Tyler, I hardly think that's..."

"What?" she snapped. "Appropriate? Necessary? Tough! He ruined my mother's life! He hasn't had to spend the last thirteen years looking after her! Do you realise how difficult it's been for us?" She gazed at him furiously, so furiously he had to look away. "Do you have any idea how lonely she's been? All her friends happily married with their own families, and her having to cope with bringing me up on her own? Not to mention what she had to suffer fourteen years ago! You've not heard her crying at night, you've not had to comfort her when she's feeling depressed about it all." Deanna's voice dropped to a whisper. "Two normal parents and a good home is all I've ever wanted. Instead, I get no father at all and a mother who's too traumatised herself to give me anything like a normal home life! Had to teach myself to cook at age five so I'd get a decent meal. Sums it up really. I don't know who's the parent sometimes, her or me." Deanna ran her fingers through her hair. "I always knew something wasn't right, that other kids never had to give counselling to their mothers, listen to their problems or help them to bed when they'd been drowning their sorrows. Other kids didn't have mothers who'd sit there with the same glass of wine clutched in

their hand for hours on end, just staring furiously into the fire, or sitting hunched up on the sofa, clutching a cushion and staring into space, tears running down their cheeks." Deanna's voice had faded to a whisper, her eyes haunted. "My first memory is her lying face down on the couch crying, and me trying to comfort her, cuddling her and telling her not to cry. I couldn't have been more than three and a half, maybe four. Do you have any idea how scared I felt? It takes most children years to stop seeing their parents as invulnerable and able to do anything. I envy them, I'd love to have that feeling of my mum being all-powerful." She buried her face in her hands, trying not to cry. "I spent most of my childhood scared out of my wits!" she whispered. "Just so scared that she wouldn't be able to protect me, that something would happen to her, that one day I'd come home and she wouldn't be there..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape could take no more. Getting up, he went to sit next to the crying girl, slipping an arm round her shoulders. Deanna tensed at his touch, but did not move away. In fact, after hesitating for a while, she leaned gratefully towards him and rested her head on his shoulder. With his other hand, Snape took one of Deanna's in his. She squeezed it gratefully. They stayed like that for a while, Deanna weeping softly into Snape's robes, Snape holding her tenderly. At length, Deanna let go of him, and moved away, drying her eyes.

"Thank you." she said quietly.

Snape's lips curled briefly into a smile but there was no joy there. "You're not the only Slytherin with problems. You're not the first to bring them to me when you're too proud to let your housemates see you like that. But you are among the ones I feel most responsible for."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Snape hesitated. So tempting, so tempting just to take her into his arms and tell her everything. But Caitlin's words came back to him - "If you were to tell her now, she'd run screaming from the room." He fought back that oh-so-dangerous urge.

"You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter. And along with almost everyone else in the country, I live in fear of my life when she's around. Despite the fact she's an old friend of mine. Under no circumstances would I want to hurt her by not taking care of her daughter properly. But that's not the only reason. The other reason is that you're also worth caring about in yourself. Because you are, in my opinion, everything a Slytherin should be."

"Really?" Deanna asked in surprise. She blushed suddenly. "Surely not."

"Don't be so modest. You are. I wish more of my students were like you. You've got talent, integrity and cunning, tempered with a healthy dash of sheer nerve to make life interesting. You know, you do remind me of your mother sometimes." Snape said thoughtfully.

This mention of her parentage caused Deanna's smile to vanish. "What about the rest of the time?" she said quietly. "Who do I remind you of then?"

Snape looked away. "Deanna, don't ask me that. If your mother wanted you to know who your father was, she'd tell you herself."

"So you do know then." Deanna said.

Snape nodded. "Yes. Yes, I know."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No." Snape got up and walked away, unable to bear Deanna's eyes on him any longer. "No, Deanna, I'm not. I'm sorry, Deanna, but..." He turned around to face her again, looking straight into her eyes. Good god, he thought, she truly does look just like me. It took all his self-control not to kneel beside her and tell her.

"Deanna, I think it's best if you leave now. For both our sakes."

Deanna hung her head.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" she said, defeated.

Snape shook his head. Deanna got up.

"Nothing I can say or do to change your mind?"

"No." Snape said firmly.

Deanna sighed. Ah well, at least she couldn't say she hadn't tried.

"Suppose I'd better be off then." She turned to her House Head one last time.

"Just one thing, sir."

"Yes?" Snape said guardedly.

"All that stuff about my childhood."

"What about it?"

"I'd, er, be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone. In fact, it's probably best if you forgot all about it. Sorry to have bothered you with it all." Deanna said, slightly embarrassed she'd revealed so much to him.

"Consider it forgotten." Snape said, torn between being amused at her pride or anguished at what she'd told him. "I am quite used to Slytherins leaving their secrets with me. I dare say I shall see you in Wednesday's lesson?"

Deanna nodded. "Until then. Oh, and sir?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for listening." she said timidly. Then, she was gone.

If Deanna Tyler thought that her life was going to calm down after that, she was soon to be disappointed. This time, however, it was not Draco causing the trouble.

It began during Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Gryffindors. Quirrell was busy lecturing them about the correct way to dispel Boggarts. To say that most of the class were bored was something of an understatement. Marlie was distracted by Fred Weasley attempting to pass her a note. Glancing at Quirrell to make sure he was paying no attention, Marlie took the note and read it.

Marls,

Any thoughts as to what's in the corridor on the third floor that we're not allowed in?

Fred

Marlie pursed her lips, intrigued. At the beginning of term, Dumbledore had declared that particular corridor out of bounds to anyone who did not wish to die an extremely painful death. However, what with one thing and another, she'd given it no thought. Picking up her quill, she scribbled a reply.

How should I know? I've not been up there.

Fred slipped a reply back.

George and me are thinking of checking it out. Fancy coming along? Tonight, half eleven in the Charms corridor. Meet us if you're interested.

Marlie grinned. She had to admit, she was curious. And with Fred and George, who knew loads of secret passages and were adept at sneaking out after curfew, there was a smaller than usual chance of getting caught.

OK, you're on.

Luella glanced up, noticing with a wry grin Marlie and Fred passing notes to and fro. Despite Marlie's frequent claims that the twins were the bane of her life, she and Fred were forming quite a cosy little twosome. Luella smiled and turned her attention back to Professor Quirrell, who had turned to write something up on the board.

Then it happened. As it had done at the Welcome Feast, fear struck at her, slashing into her heart, a wave of sheer malevolence breaking down her defences, and a muted roaring, almost like a voice, screaming at her to reveal herself. No, no, she wanted to scream, no, please, leave me alone! She buried her face in her hands, desperately trying to hide from it.

The fear faded. Slowly Luella opened her eyes and looked around. The whole of the class was staring at her, and Professor Quirrell was looking at her nervously, more so than usual. She looked helplessly at Deanna, who looked horrified.

"Lu, are you all right?" Deanna whispered. Luella realised that she'd pushed her chair right back into Lucas Vetinari's desk immediately behind her and thrown her arms up to shield her face. Swiftly taking stock of the situation, she decided to make the most of the opportunity to get out unscathed.

"Er, no." she said, quite truthfully. "I'm, um, not feeling well. Er, Professor, may I be excused? I think I need to see Madam Pomfrey."

Quirrell nodded, speechless, and Luella swiftly gathered up her things and left.

Marlie steered Deanna aside after the lesson.

"Hey, Tyler." she whispered.

"What's up, Marls?" Deanna asked, puzzled. "Why are you whispering?"

"Keep your voice down." Marlie murmured. "And come with me."

Deanna followed Marlie around the corner to a quiet point where they could talk undisturbed.

"So what are you planning now, Lovegood?" Deanna asked, intrigued.

"Remember what Dumbledore said at the beginning of term?" Marlie said quietly. "About that out of bounds corridor."

"What about it?" Deanna asked, becoming interested.

"Ever wondered what might be in it?"

"Strangely enough, I've had other things on my mind just recently. Why, have you found out or something?"

"Not yet." Marlie grinned. "But by this time tomorrow... Fred, George and me are planning a little excursion. Fancy coming along?"

Deanna grinned. This sounded like exactly the sort of thing to cheer her up.

"You're on. What time?"

"We're meeting them at half eleven in the Charms corridor. Fred told me about a secret passage that leads there from behind that statue of Morgan LeFay at the dungeon entrance. That'll help us get there and back unnoticed. Come on, it'll be a laugh. You up for it?"

"Maybe. You sure Fred and George can be trusted?"

"Of course they can. They're mates! Listen, if the Snitch reacts badly when we meet them, we'll go straight back, OK? Are you in or not?"

Deanna grinned. "OK. Count me in." Her expression changed. "We'd better go back to the dorm. I want to find out what's up with Lu."

Luella didn't go to the hospital wing, but instead headed straight back to her dorm, where she curled up with Sooty. She was still lying there when the others returned. Deanna rushed straight over to her.

"Lu, are you OK? You looked awful!"

Luella pulled herself up. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just got this splitting headache. I'll be OK, don't worry." It was true, she did feel better. Not completely well, but better.

Deanna did not look convinced. "Yeah? You were dead pale and shaking all over. Wasn't she, Rianne?"

Rianne nodded, sitting next to Luella. "You looked terrified. Trembling and sweating, as if you were trying to get away from something."

"I wasn't scared!" Luella said irritably. "I feel perfectly fine, I just have a headache. Now please all of you, leave me alone. I will be quite all right, if you just stop bothering me." She got up and headed for the common room. However, despite her words, she didn't feel all right. She could still sense a malevolent presence somewhere not too far away, a presence that wanted nothing more than to see her suffer. Shivering, she walked swiftly into the common room, where the usual noise and bustle could make her forget, for a while, the image that had flashed into her mind during the lesson, the image of two inhuman red eyes...

She was in a pretty good mood as she got ready to go out. Dressing up in her smart clothes, running a brush through her hair before tying it back with a black ribbon, Luella Martin regarded herself coolly in the mirror. Dressed to kill, even if it is only Marlie's, she thought.

She went downstairs to say goodbye to her parents.

"Just going over to Marlie's, won't be long!" she called cheerfully. Her parents turned to look at her, her father lowering his paper and her mother putting her knitting down. Luella felt her heart skip a beat. Professor Snape and Mrs. Tyler were looking back at her in surprise.

"Going to Marlie's?" Snape asked, as if she'd just said she was going to the Prime Minister's. "What on earth for?"

Mrs. Tyler looked shocked. "But you can't go to Marlie's, dear!" she whispered.

"Why not?" Luella asked in bewilderment.

"Why not?" Snape said angrily. "Because you're the Heir of Slytherin, of course!"

"No." Luella whispered in fear. "No. I'm not, I don't want to be, it's not me, you've made a mistake."

Snape got up, a twisted smile on his face. "I don't think so, Miss Martin." He reached out to grab her arm. The sleeve of his robe rode back and Luella caught a glimpse of a serpent tattooed on his wrist. The sight of it caused the fear to lash at her again.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed and turned, running. The scene switched to Hogwarts, and she was running down the Slytherin corridor. She heard someone or something chasing her, running after her, footsteps becoming faster and faster, gaining on her. Hot breath on her neck, as her pursuer was almost on her. She didn't dare stop or turn round, because if she did, something horrible would happen to her. If she could just make it to her common room...

Reaching the entrance, she sobbed the password and stumbled through the door, slamming it shut. Sliding to the floor, she gasped with relief, safe. She looked up, and felt her heart freeze. A tall, black cloaked figure with its face hidden under a hood had been sitting by the fire and now was walking towards her. Luella went numb with fright, too afraid to move. The figure began laughing, high and cold. It pulled back its hood. Luella looked up, straight into a pair of blood-red eyes.

Gasping, Luella sprang bolt upright. All around her was darkness. She ran a hand through her hair, breathing heavily, heart pounding. Just a dream, she told herself, just a dream. She sat hunched up in bed and rested her head on her knees, allowing herself to relax.

Until she heard voices. And the sound of someone moving around the dorm. Luella reached for her wand, her blood running cold. Peering through a gap in the curtains, she was able to make out two figures, one standing, one kneeling down, searching under Deanna's bed. The standing figure was shining a lit up wand around.

"I can't believe you've lost your wand!" the standing figure hissed. Luella felt the tension melt away and relief go flooding through her as she recognised Marlie's voice. "It's every mage's most important bit of kit and you've lost it?"

"It's here somewhere." the kneeling figure whispered, in a voice that could only be Deanna's. "Hang on, got it." She crawled out and got to her feet. "*Lumos*." Wandlight materialised immediately. "Right, let's go. Don't want to wake them up."

Luella flung back the curtains, her own wand blazing into life, causing both girls to start. "Where on earth do you two think you're going, it's the middle of the night!" Luella demanded.

Both of them tried unsuccessfully not to look guilty.

"Nowhere."

"Hospital wing."

Marlie and Deanna looked at each other.

"Er, Marlie's not feeling well."

"We're only going to the common room."

"You two are the most hopeless liars I've ever come across. What are you up to?" said Luella crossly.

They looked at each other and sighed. Luella could guess what was going through their minds. Marlie no doubt thinking *Is she likely to get us in trouble if we tell her?* and Deanna thinking *Lu's safe enough. She'll be OK.*

Deanna turned to her. "OK, we'll let you in on it, but keep your voice down. We don't want to wake Rianne up, she'll go straight to Snape."

"You know that corridor that's out of bounds?" Marlie whispered.

Luella gasped. "You're not! Marlie, that's dangerous, we could get killed, or expelled, or anything!"

"We'll be fine!" Marlie reassured her. "Fred and George are going too, there's a secret passage that leads up there. We won't get caught. Just one look. That's all."

Luella slid out of bed and reached for her cloak. Despite herself, she was curious to know what *was* in the corridor that was so important and/or dangerous. Plus she couldn't face the thought of another nightmare. "OK. But I'm coming with you."

The three of them slipped out of the secret passage and into the Charms corridor. Fred and George were waiting for them. They did not look pleased to see Deanna and Luella.

"Bloody hell, Lovegood, we didn't know you were going to invite the whole of Slytherin House along." George commented. "We'd've started charging if you'd told us that."

"Oh be quiet." Marlie snapped. "They're my mates. They're trustworthy. So. This corridor then."

"This way." Fred gestured towards the door. Deanna tried the handle.

"Locked." she said.

"Of course it's bloody locked!" Fred hissed. "What did you think it was going to be? Left wide open with a big sign saying 'Witch Magazine's three-times winner of the Most Nickable Item of the Year Award This Way' hung over the top and huge great flashing neon arrows pointing to it? Perhaps with a set of footprints marking a little trail from the Entrance Hall for thieves to follow."

"Weasley, if you had a milligram of common sense in that Gryffindor skull of yours, you'd know that if a mage wants something kept safe, they're going to make a bit more secure than just bunging it away in a quiet cupboard with a Chubb lock on it!" Deanna snapped. "Honestly, bloody Gryffindors." She turned back to the door. "So what else is on this thing?" She pointed her wand at the door and intoned "*Sensor Incantatem!*"

A jet of light hit the door. They waited expectantly. Nothing happened.

"Nothing." Deanna said in surprise. "No spells whatsoever protecting that door. How odd."

"Right." said Fred. "Leave it to me then. *Alohomora!*" The lock unfastened, and Fred strode in confidently, with the other four following him.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Luella peered over his shoulders to see what the hold up was. And realised instantly why they hadn't bothered protecting the door with magic.

Facing them, taking up the entire corridor, was the biggest dog they'd ever seen. With three heads. Each one containing a row of very big, very sharp teeth. And the only reason it hadn't already sunk them into one of them was because they'd just woken it up. It was blinking at them sleepily, but one of its heads was already beginning to growl.

"Oh gods." Marlie whispered. Fred immediately began slowly stepping backwards.

"Ah. All right. Let's just slowly and carefully back out of here, shall we? Nice doggy, didn't mean to disturb you."

The dog was growling louder now. And getting to its feet.

As one they looked at Fred.

"Run!" he yelled. Something inside them all gave way, and as one, they made for the door. The dog howled in fury and made a grab for them. Deanna, last in line, sent a Fire Charm its way, causing it to back away whimpering. Finally, they all made it through the door. George slammed it shut, leaning against it. They all heard something slam against the door. George was struggling to hold it back. "Help me!" he whispered, pale with fright.

Luella hastily pointed her wand at the door. "*Aromohola!*" The lock snapped shut. The dog continued to bang against the door and growl, but it seemed to hold. All five of them slumped against the wall breathing sighs of relief.

"What the hell was that?" Marlie gasped.

Deanna recovered her breath. "Now, I don't know for certain, but I think that might have been Cerberus."

"Who's he when he's at home?" George asked.

"Guardian of the Underworld." Deanna told him.

"Well, what's he doing at Hogwarts?" Fred asked. "They've surely not opened a new entrance to it here?"

Deanna shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. Maybe one of Snape's experiments went wrong or something."

"It's guarding something." Luella said. "Did none of you see that trapdoor it was standing on?"

"Strangely enough, I was rather more concerned with its heads and the possibility of them making contact with my leg." Fred snapped.

"Lu, is there anything you don't notice?" Marlie asked in awe.

"Naturally observant, me. Oh hell."

"What?"

"There."

They looked to where Luella was pointing. Watching them unblinkingly were the blank, staring eyes of Mrs. Norris.

Deanna was first to react. "Quick. Back to that passage." They turned and ran in the opposite direction, hoping to get there before Filch did. As they turned the corner, they heard footsteps behind them and Filch's voice saying "Come, my pretty. Show me where they went."

They had reached the passage that would take them back to the dungeons. Fred was tapping his wand against the entrance and desperately gasping the password.

"Hurry!" Marlie hissed. Filch's shadow was now visible, getting nearer and nearer. Luella closed her eyes in desperation and prayed please don't see us, please don't see us. Instinctively, she imagined a wall between them and Filch, protecting them from discovery.

The passage entrance opened at the same moment as Filch came round the corner. The students froze in shock as he looked right at them. The corridor was well lit, and they were right out in the open. Now they were most certainly for it.

Then something strange happened. Filch ignored them. He simply stared down the corridor, puzzled. Then, he shrugged and turned angrily to Mrs. Norris.

"Drat it, my sweet. They've got away. Never mind. Next time. Next time they try anything, we'll be waiting. Come." With that, he turned and was gone.

The collective relief this time was greater than when they'd escaped the dog.

"What's wrong with him?" Marlie whispered in shock. "We were right here!"

"Who cares?" Fred whispered back. "He missed us, that's all that matters. Listen, this passage will take you back to the dungeons. We'll leave you here, OK? See you lot."

"See ya, lads." Marlie whispered, ushering Deanna and Luella into the passage.

They emerged at the other end and headed into the dungeons. Not far now, Luella thought, relieved. Nearly at the Slytherin Corridor. They reached it without event, and headed swiftly for the Serpent's Nest. Only thing in their way now was Snape's office. Luella hoped fervently that Professor Snape didn't make a habit of sleepwalking.

And it was here that their luck ran out. Snape was indeed awake. A light came from his classroom and voices were clearly heard. With a jolt of fear, Luella recognised them as Snape and Filch.

"Professor, someone's been out of bed. Trying to get at the Philosopher's Stone."

Snape sounded alarmed. "The Stone? Show me. Did you see who it was?"

"No, they disappeared before I could get a glimpse of them."

All three of them heard footsteps getting nearer. Before they could react, the door flung open to reveal the furious form of Professor Snape staring down at them.

For a moment none of them spoke. All three girls had gone white with shock.

"And what, I might ask, are you three doing out of bed?" Snape hissed savagely.

Luella didn't dare reply. To everyone's surprise, it was Marlie who answered.

"Please sir." she said timidly. "Deanna couldn't sleep, sir. She keeps having nightmares, sir. About her mum."

Deanna immediately tried to look as if this wasn't news to her, forcing her most scared, tired look.

Luella decided to elaborate. "We were wondering if you could give her some sleeping potion, sir. The type that gets rid of bad dreams. She keeps crying out in her sleep."

Snape seemed to soften instantly. "You had better come in." he said quietly. He disappeared into his office, and re-emerged with a small bottle.

"Here." he said, giving it to Deanna. "This should help. Works almost immediately, dreamless sleep guaranteed. You might sleep in, but given that tomorrow is Saturday, that shouldn't be a problem. Now get to bed, I've got things to do."

"Thank you sir." Deanna said softly as the three of them headed back to the common room.

Once inside, the three of them breathed the biggest sigh of relief of the evening.

"Oh my god, I can't believe we got away with that!" Marlie gasped. "We were that close, *that close!*"

"I tell you, Marlie, that was the best story you've ever come up with." Deanna said fervently.

"Congratulations yourself! That was the best acting I've seen in ages." Marlie grinned.

Deanna groaned. "Oh gods, now he's going to think I keep dreaming about it. He's going to be feeling sorry for me! Nooo..."

"Better feeling sorry for you than putting you in detention." Luella said firmly. "Or losing us points. Come on, let's get to bed. Deanna, I suggest you drink that potion when we get there, he's going to get suspicious if you turn up at breakfast tomorrow bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"No chance of that." Deanna yawned. But she drank it anyway.

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Chapter Eight Redeemer Rising

The next day, Luella had largely forgotten about the night's adventures. Deanna remained in bed until midday, suffering the after-effects of the sleeping potion, while Marlie did not feel inclined to discuss the matter any further. Rianne did most of the talking, discussing their Transfiguration homework and making the odd comment on why Deanna couldn't be bothered to get up. Luella said nothing, just letting them talk. It wasn't until they were leaving breakfast that last night's events leapt back into consciousness.

Marlie and Rianne had gone on ahead, discussing what they were going to get for Christmas and plans for the holidays. Luella hung back, something nagging at the back of her mind.

She passed the teachers' table, rubbing her eyes sleepily. The soft, oh-so-slightly indolent tones of Professor Snape caught her attention.

"How far did you get this time, Samael? Have you worked out how to get past the first hurdle yet?" Snape's voice carried a combination of interest and boredom.

"D-d-don't know what you m-mean, S-s-Severus." Quirrell stammered nervously.

"Oh, I think you do."

Luella stopped dead in her tracks. This conversation sounded just too interesting to miss.

"Come now, Samael." Snape was saying softly. "If you are seeking something beyond your current prospects, I can hardly fault you for that. Are we not both Slytherins? Do we not both understand power and its importance? Maybe we can help each other. What were you doing last night?"

Quirrell seemed outraged. "I w-was m-m-marking m-m-my third years' as-s-s-signments!" he snapped.

"Was that all?" Snape asked. "No matter. You will have other opportunities, I'm sure." He glanced up and noticed Luella standing there. "Well? Do you want something?"

"No, sir. Just leaving." she said quickly. She was about to walk on when the fear hit her again, worse than before. A torrent of rage washed over her, and she could hear a high, cold voice screaming at her to give up the fight and die. Clutching her head, which felt like it was about to split open, she sank to the floor whimpering.

"Please, no, leave me alone!" she heard herself crying. She was vaguely aware of people around her, and someone trying to help her up.

She fought hard, terrified. "Let go of me!" she screamed, lashing out then curling up as the fear worsened.

"Get away from her." a familiar voice cut through the howls of rage. Whoever had been trying to help her up let go, and she felt the fear die away as swiftly as it had come. Someone was kneeling next to her, an arm around her shoulders. She looked up into Snape's black eyes, far gentler than they usually were.

"Are you all right, Miss Martin?" he said softly.

Luella shivered. The attack was over, but she could still sense it around, this thing that seemed to hate her so much. She gazed unhappily into Snape's eyes. What she read there made her mind up. "Help me." she whispered.

Snape nodded. He turned to the ranks of students who had gathered around. "Well? Don't you have things to be getting on with? Miss Martin is not well, she does not need the entire school staring at her as if she's some kind of exhibit. Quirrell?"

Professor Quirrell, who had been standing watching, seemed to come to life. Stuttering more so than usual, he began moving students on. The crowd began to disperse, although more from the looks Snape was giving them than from anything Quirrell was doing.

Snape returned his attention to Luella. "Can you stand?" he asked her.

"I think so." she whispered, clutching on to him for support as he helped her up. "Please don't leave me."

"I'm not leaving." he reassured her. The look on his face changed from one of concern to one of annoyance as something caught his attention.

"Potter, didn't you hear me earlier? Miss Martin is not well, she needs rest and quiet, not the likes of you staring at her." he snarled.

Harry was standing there, Hermione and Ron behind him. He was looking at Snape with barely disguised hostility.

"Where are you taking her? She needs to go to the hospital wing." he said coldly.

Snape's eyes flared in anger. "I don't believe it's any of your business, Potter."

"She's a friend of mine, of course it's my business!" Harry looked furious.

Luella decided to defuse the situation. "Harry, leave it." she said quietly. "I'll be OK. I'm just overworked, that's all."

"Come with us, Luella." said Hermione gently. "We'll look after you, if you like."

Luella shook her head, smiling weakly. "It's OK. Don't worry. I'll be fine. You three go. Just go."

"If you're sure..." said Hermione, worried.

"I believe Miss Martin has made her feelings quite clear on the subject." Snape said acidly. "Now go before I start taking five points off Gryffindor for every second of my time you waste."

Harry led the other two away, not looking at all happy. Snape turned his attention back to Luella.

"Come." he said quietly. "Let's go to my office, where we can talk with fewer distractions."

The three Gryffindors watched Snape lead Luella away.

"Will she be all right, do you reckon?" Hermione whispered.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what Snape's planned for her. For all we know, he could have caused her to collapse like that."

Ron snorted. "Of course it was him. He says something to her, she turns to go and then she falls down in a heap crying out 'please, no, leave me alone'. And she seems to recover as soon as he gets near her. Now if that's not some kind of psychic attack, I'd like to know what is."

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't know, why would Snape do that to someone in his own House? And one of his brightest and best young students at that?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows? But I wouldn't put it past him. Maybe he wants her to work for him and she won't. Maybe he needs her help and he's trying to force her into it."

Ron looked anxiously at the door Snape had led Luella through.

"Do you think we should go after her, make sure she's all right?"

Harry and Hermione turned to stare at him.

"Ron, you hate Luella." said Hermione.

"Yeah, Ron, you said she was an untrustworthy Slytherin git and we shouldn't have anything to do with her." said Harry.

Ron shuffled uneasily. "Yeah, but that was before. I mean, she can't be all bad if Snape's trying to attack her, can she?"

Hermione and Harry just grinned at each other.

"No, Ron."

"Of course not, Ron."

Luella followed Snape silently to his office. Snape, seeming to sense how she was feeling, deliberately slowed his pace so she could keep up, for which Luella felt profoundly grateful. She could still sense something out there, looking for her, trying to hunt her down. Shivering, she drew closer to Snape for comfort.

And then she felt it again. Clutching desperately at Snape's robes, she sank to her knees sobbing.

"Help me, please, don't let it get me, please, please!" she wept. Snape dropped to her side immediately.

"Luella, it's all right. No one's going to hurt you." she heard him say gently, stroking her hair. She was aware of someone approaching and Snape turning to see who it was.

"Quirrell!" she heard him snarl. "I thought I told you to stay away from her!"

"I c-came to see if you n-needed any help, Severus." she heard him stammer.

"None from you, Samael." Snape's voice cut him short. "Are you Head of Slytherin House or am I?"

No response. Snape was speaking again. "Good, then we know where we stand. I trust you remember what I said to you two years ago, about what would happen if any of my Slytherins fell victim to Dark magic again?"

Again no answer. Luella heard the sound of someone turning and walking away. Slowly, very slowly, the fear subsided. Luella opened her eyes.

"What's happening to me?" she whispered tearfully. "Am I going mad?"

Snape didn't answer her, just pulled her close. "Come on." he said quietly. "We need to get you to my office immediately. No, don't try to get up." Luella had been trying to get to her feet, but stopped. "I'll carry you." She let him scoop her up into his arms and rested her head gratefully against him. She didn't know what it was, but the fear felt less acute, less sharp when Snape was nearby. Without another word, Snape turned and walked swiftly through the dungeons towards the Slytherin Corridor.

Snape carried her into his office and set her down. Luella collapsed into a chair and sat there quietly, huddled up, trying to calm herself. Slowly but surely, she felt the presence fade and her mind return to normal. She dried her eyes and looked at Snape, who was going through his store cupboard. He returned with a small phial of potion, which he poured into a cup for her. She took it dubiously.

"What is it?"

"A Nerve-Calming Potion. I usually keep a small supply in. It will help you a little."

Luella drank it gratefully, feeling her entire body warming up and tingling all over. In a few moments, she felt much calmer.

"Thank you." she smiled weakly. Snape returned the smile briefly before pulling up a chair and sitting next to her.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked softly.

"Better." She shuddered, remembering how it had been only minutes before.
"Professor, I think I'm losing my mind."

"Well, why don't you tell me what was going on there, and we'll see what we can do." His voice sounded calm enough, but Luella could tell that it was masking worry and concern. She took a deep breath.

"Something's after me. I've felt it ever since term began. At the Welcome Feast. It was terrifying. I just felt this fear, like I was going to die or something. Then it went away, but I couldn't relax. I just had this feeling that I was in danger, that something was wrong. That somewhere out there is this person, this thing, that hates me and wants me dead, and it's looking for me. I've been feeling like this all term, on and off, but yesterday, it suddenly got worse."

"Worse how?"

"During Defence Against the Dark Arts, I felt it again, like it had been at the feast. Except it was worse, much closer. Like whatever's looking for me was right near me and aware of me. I had to leave the lesson, I was shaking so badly. Went back to my dorm and stayed there. Then this morning it happened to me again. And this time it was the worst it had ever been. At least yesterday I could walk away from it. Not today." She shivered. "Well, you saw me, I was a complete wreck. Thank god you were there. I couldn't have coped without you. Thank you." said Luella huskily.

"It's my job, Luella. But nevertheless, I'm touched by your gratitude." said Snape, amused. "So, do you still think I'm saving you as a sacrifice for Lord Voldemort?"

Luella shook her head. "No."

"Good. Because I'm not. I admit to being under orders to observe and protect you, and I do have certain responsibilities as your teacher and House Master, but don't think I've no feelings for you personally. Because you've got a lot of potential, one of the finest minds I've ever encountered and what's more, you've got a personality, which is a lot more than I can say for some of your housemates. You'll go far, and I'll be proud to witness it. However, right now, I'm deeply concerned about you." Snape was no longer smiling.

Luella shuddered, reminded of why she was here. "What's causing it? Do you know? Because I've never been so afraid in my life. This thing, it hates me! Keeps screaming

furiously at me that it's going to kill me, that when it finds me, I'll wish I'd never been born. I'm so scared..." Her voice trailed off. "Help me, Professor." she whispered.

"I'll do what I can." Snape promised. He looked thoughtful. "You say it got suddenly worse in Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Luella nodded.

"And this morning, you seemed to become more agitated when Professor Quirrell went to your assistance. When he tried to help you up, you nearly broke his nose."

"Did I?" said Luella, shocked. "Oh my god, I don't remember doing that at all. Just someone trying to help me up and the fear suddenly getting worse, much worse. I just lashed out. Oops. Can you apologise to him for me?"

"I'll do no such thing. Apologise to him yourself. If, that is, you still feel sorry. Anyway, you seemed to calm down when I went to you myself and made him get out of the way."

Luella nodded. "Yes, it was strange. It went quite suddenly. Like there was something about you which made it back down for a while. I could still sense it though."

"Doubtless. Your senses returned, and you were able to talk to me and Potter, and you were able to walk out of there. In fact, you were recovering quite well until we were in the dungeons."

"Yeah, it came back. And how." Luella shivered. "So much more powerful that time. Before it had just been wildly lashing out at me. But then, it was so focused. Like it was deliberately trying to attack me, trying to bring me down. I just couldn't do anything."

Snape was nodding knowingly. "Were you aware of anything going on at the time?"

"I heard you talking to someone, Professor Quirrell, wasn't it? Telling him to get lost, you were all right on your own. Except rather more threatening and sarcastic than that. And it went away again." Luella regarded Snape carefully, secretly rather impressed. "How do you do it? I wish you'd teach me."

"What, the subtle art of sarcasm? If you need to be taught, you're not cut out for it." Snape grinned. Luella laughed.

"No, after two years of your lessons and ten years of hanging around Deanna, I think I've got sarcasm down to a fine art. No, I want to know how to protect myself. Doubt Quirrell'd be any good at teaching me."

Snape met her eyes levelly. "There you have it, Luella. Your problem in a nutshell. Professor Quirrell is no good for you. In fact, I would go so far as to say that he would only serve to worsen your predicament."

"What?" Luella said in disbelief.

"Think. In whose lesson did the fear begin to overwhelm you? Who was near you when it struck again, and whose touch made it worse? And whose presence was enough to completely break down your defences?"

"You don't mean... Professor Quirrell?" Luella was openmouthed. Snape nodded. Luella couldn't take it in. "But he's a teacher! He wouldn't want to hurt me, would he?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "So am I, yet until recently you were rather less charitable about my motives."

"That's different. You're different. You're not really like a teacher."

"How's that?" Snape asked, intrigued.

"I don't know. You just seem more... more, well, competent."

Snape burst out laughing. "More competent! I'm flattered. What would my colleagues say if they knew that. They'd be most put out."

Luella shook her head. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that most of them don't seem to have a life outside teaching. But you do. It's like you're more of a real person. You've seen things out there, you've lived. Do you know what I mean?"

A shadow crossed over Snape's face. "I've seen things all right. Don't know whether you could call it living though. More like surviving."

"That's what I mean. McGonagall or Flitwick would never have said anything like that." said Luella quietly. "You've got scars all over your psyche, that no one else I know has. And yet you're here and you're sane. You've been there before me, haven't you? So help me now." She gazed fiercely into his eyes, silver-blue staring into black. "Help me."

Snape reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. "You have my word." He sat back, releasing her. "But first, we need to ascertain what's causing it. You react especially badly to Quirrell's presence. Why?"

"I don't know. Why would Quirrell want to kill me?" whispered Luella.

"Maybe it's not Quirrell. Maybe it's someone he's working with. Or for."

"He's working with someone else who wants me dead? But who? I'm just a kid!" Luella said in wonder.

Again that intense gaze from Snape. "Are you?"

Luella felt her blood run cold with horror. "Oh god. Oh no. Please. Not him. It can't be." She looked wildly at Snape, desperate for any crumb of comfort. Snape said nothing, just looked steadily back at her. Luella felt her self-control snap and the fear come rushing back.

"I'm not ready!" she whispered, holding herself tightly to try and stop herself shaking. "I'm only thirteen, I can't possibly face him yet. I can't do it, Professor. He can't be back, he can't be. Not... not You-Know-Who..."

"Easy to be brave about saying the name when you think he's dead and gone, isn't it?" Snape said with a touch of bitterness. "Now at least you know what you're really up against. Yes, Luella, I do believe Lord Voldemort is coming back."

Luella squealed at the mention of the name. Snape was unrepentant. "Be quiet, girl. Crying, begging for mercy, it won't protect you. Not from him. He won't respect your weakness, just use it against you and laugh while he's doing it. No use appealing to his better nature; he doesn't have one. If you want to survive to fight him, you are going to have to be tough. And that means having the courage to name him. Say it, child." He took her head in his hands and stared deep into her eyes. "Say it!" he hissed.

"Let go of me!" Luella wept, struggling. "Let go, you're hurting me!"

"Not nearly as much as he would. Now say the name!"

"Damn you." Luella whispered furiously. "Damn you! Let me go!"

"That's better. Now you're fighting. Feel the anger, it'll fuel your power. Now. Send it back to him. Let him feel your rage for once!" Snape hissed, but less angry than he had been.

Luella's face twisted with fury as she wriggled out of Snape's grip and pushed him away. "Damn you! Damn you both! You and him!"

"Who? Name him, child!"

"You-Know-Who. The Dark Lord. Lord bloody Vol-de-mort!" she snarled, leaping to her feet and kicking her chair over. Growling, she gazed around the room swiftly, her eyes flashing dangerously as she tried to sense where he might be. "Damn you to hell, Voldemort. Damn you to HELL!" She screamed the last word. On the other side of the room, one of the many jars exploded, sending shards of glass everywhere. Snape, with the reflexes of one who had spent most of his adult life dealing with potentially unstable concoctions, dived to the floor instinctively. Luella was less fortunate. A flying piece of glass caught her cheek causing her to cry out and drop to the floor. She reached out and touched her face, wincing as she saw her fingers covered in blood. Snape produced his wand and crawled over to her. "*Asclepio*," he murmured, touching it to her face. Luella felt the pain disappear immediately. She sat in silence as Snape cleaned the blood off her hand.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked her, a wry grin on his face.

Luella reached irritably behind her head and removed the black ribbon that normally tied her hair back, allowing it to flow free for once. "Damn you. You're a bastard, you know that?"

"Count yourself fortunate I like you, Luella Martin. Not that you're the first to have called me that, by any means. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I pushed you like that. Believe it or not, it wasn't pleasant for me either. But I had to do it. Had to get you angry at him. It's the only way to fight him, the only way. You understand why I did it, don't you?"

Luella nodded quietly. "If I'm angry at him, I don't have the chance to be frightened."

"Correct. More than that, you can reverse the roles and beat him at his own game. He is as frightened of you as you were of him. That is why he wants you dead. He fears you. There is an ancient saying among us Slytherins, Luella. Where there's fear there's power. Another related one is that when people are frightened of you, you can do anything. Make him fear you. And understand that his every action is driven by fear that someone will take his power from him, fear that you will take it from him. Know that he fears you. And with that knowledge, find your power. You are the Redeemer. You will bring him down. Because you are stronger, and because you don't rely solely on fear for your power. Now. How do you feel?"

Luella gazed coolly into his eyes. "Alive." she said, a grim smile spreading across her face. "Absolutely, positively, alive. And most definitely kicking." She shook her head, causing her hair to fall over her shoulders.

Snape smiled in return. "Well done, Luella Martin. Consider your lesson learned. Now you know why you're one of my favourite students."

Luella merely inclined her head. "Well, when you're learning from the best..." She laughed and got to her feet, surveying the damage. "Oh my. Erm, sorry about that. My temper gets the better of me sometimes."

"No need to apologise. One day you may be glad of it. Don't worry about it, I'm quite used to clearing up after experiments gone wrong. A few Reparo charms should be sufficient." Snape got to his feet to show her out. He turned her to face him. "If it happens again and you need my support, find me. You know I'm on your side."

"I know." Luella smiled. "Thank you."

Luella was met by the entire common room falling silent as she walked in. Clearly word had got around.

Draco was first to approach her, smirking, Crabbe and Goyle either side of him.

"Is it true, Martin? They say you fainted at breakfast this morning. Crying and screaming."

Luella just gazed straight into his eyes. Strange, she thought, they're the same colour as mine, I never noticed that before. All she said, however, was a simple, venomous "Shut up, Malfoy." Draco took a few steps backward and hastily walked away, shrinking from the look in her eyes. She swept her eyes around the room, causing

even the bravest Slytherins to look away. Across the room, Marlie walked straight over to her, Rianne in tow.

"Lu, are you all right?" Marlie gasped. "You were in an awful state. Professor Snape just snapped at us irritably to go away. What's up?"

Luella gazed at them both, sizing them up. She remembered their first year. So this was what it was like, going through a crisis and beating it. Rianne and Marlie had both had their own initiations into life's harsher lessons that year.

"I'll tell you both in the dorm. Come on. Let's get Tyler out of her pit."

They returned to the dorm to find Deanna staggering out of bed.

"My head." Deanna groaned. "What was in that potion of Snape's? I feel like I've done ten rounds with Voldemort."

"Don't be silly, if you'd done ten rounds with Voldemort, you'd be dead." Luella replied candidly, sitting down. "Marlie, lock the door. We need to talk. All of us."

Marlie locked the door and pulled up a chair. Rianne had already sat down and Deanna was rubbing her eyes, taking in Luella for the first time. This served to wake her up at once.

"Lu, what's happened to you? You look..." Deanna struggled to find the words. "Different. Older. You look like..." she hesitated. "You look like my mum."

"Very flattering. And not entirely groundless. We've both had brushes with Lord Voldie, after all."

"Voldemort?" Marlie gasped. "When have you encountered Voldemort?"

"Today." Luella said quietly. "Today, I fought him and won the first round. He's coming back, folks. And we're going to be in the front line."

She surveyed her friends to see how they'd taken the news. Marlie hadn't reacted at all, she was just staring into space. Deanna looked disbelieving. Rianne looked horrified.

"Coming back...?" she whispered. "You-Know-Who, coming back? But he's dead, surely? He can't be..." Her voice trailed off. Luella smiled grimly.

"I'm sure that's what he'd like you to think. But he's not dead. He's got no body and very little power, but he's not dead. And he's trying to come back."

Deanna laughed scornfully. "Lu, while I'm quite willing to believe he could stage a comeback, have you actually got any proof of this? Or have you just been around Professor Snape for too long?"

Luella got up and started pacing the room. "All right. You want proof, you got it. But first there's something you all need to know. Deanna, I know you already know this. Rianne, I'm pretty certain you don't. Marlie, I'm not sure about you, but I think you probably do." She took a deep breath. "Are you all familiar with the Redeemer Prophecy?"

Rianne nodded. "Yeah, two Slytherin Muggle-borns born a thousand years after Slytherin's downfall. One who'll bring Slytherin House to its knees, and one who'll save it. But what...?"

"What does it have to do with now? I'll tell you. Slyth number one is Lord Voldemort, who almost brought this house to the brink while he was around last time. We were never trusted before, but the spectre of the Dark Lord has made it far, far worse. We don't even trust ourselves now." She drew a deep breath and fixed them all keenly. "But there's hope. Fifty years after he was born, as foretold by the prophecy, Slyth number two was born to a humble Muggle family. She grew up, she went to Hogwarts, she ended up in Slytherin." Luella smiled bitterly. "Slyth number two is me."

Marlie raised her eyes to look at Luella. She didn't look shocked, just resigned, and Luella knew instantly that she did indeed know the truth. Deanna was giving Luella her 'I hope you know what you're doing' look. Rianne was staring blankly.

"You? Slytherin Redeemer?" She seemed to get over the shock. "You can't be, you're just a kid."

"So was Voldemort once."

Rianne winced. "Stop saying that name!" She stared disbelievingly at Luella. "It can't be you. You're a friend of mine, you can't be the Redeemer! You've always been so, well, ordinary. How can you possibly be the Redeemer?"

Marlie spoke up quietly. "No, it's true, Ri. I was there when she got her wand. Saw the Slytherin Serpent come out of it with my own eyes. Mum told me what it meant when we got home, made me promise to keep an eye on her and not tell anyone."

"And you never bothered mentioning it?" Rianne asked hollowly.

"No I didn't! You didn't see Mum when she was telling me." Marlie snapped. "I have never ever seen her like that before or since. It is the first and only time I have ever seen her frightened. I tell you, after seeing her like that, there was no way I was going to argue! Tyler, did you know?"

Deanna smiled grimly. "Course I knew. Mum told me and Luella both when we got home. And told me before the train left for Hogwarts that Luella would need me, and to look after her."

Marlie raised an eyebrow. "You know, DT, you could have made all our lives a lot easier by letting me in on that little piece of information when I asked you back in the first year!"

Deanna squirmed. "Yeah, but we weren't talking, were we? By the time we were, we had other things on our minds, you know?"

"If I can interrupt you all." Luella said meaningfully. "Rianne, I can see you still don't quite believe me. So, in the interests of stopping the arguments..." She produced her wand and concentrated. It was so easy, really. The Slytherin Serpent appeared at once, oozing out of her wand and rearing up so it towered over the other three. Marlie shut her eyes, but to her credit did not scream. Deanna backed away, edgily. Rianne cowered in terror. Luella flicked her wand and the Serpent vanished.

"Find me an ordinary thirteen year old who could do that." said Luella softly.

Slowly, Rianne emerged to look at Luella. "Oh my god." she whispered. "Oh my god, it is you."

"Yes. It's me." Luella sat down again. "And I wanted you all to know that. I didn't want any secrecy, I didn't want any lies, I didn't want you all wondering if it was safe to trust anyone else." She gave them her most penetrating gaze. "He's coming back. I felt it at the Welcome Feast, I felt it yesterday in Quirrell's lesson, I felt it this morning. He's coming back and he knows who I am. And he wants me dead." She felt the enormity of that settle on her again. "I've got the fight of my life, literally the fight of my life, on my hands here. I can't do it alone. I'm going to need all the help I can get. I am going to need you lot. Do you remember when we won the Quidditch Cup in our first year?"

They nodded. Luella continued. "We swore always to be friends and allies on the Great Serpent, to never let our differences come between us, always to help each other. Well, this is it. Let's see what you're made of. I need your support. Your lives are at risk if you do it. Everyone's life is at risk if you don't. But I'm not going to force you into it. I want you with me willingly or not at all. If you don't want in, I won't judge you. If you want out, just leave now. I won't blame you at all. Are you with me or not?" She held her hand out.

Deanna nodded brusquely. "Of course I'm with you." She reached out and took Luella's hand. Luella smiled and turned to Marlie. "Marls?"

Marlie hesitated. Then, she shrugged and placed her own hand over Deanna's. "All right. Count me in."

Deanna grinned at her. Luella smiled knowingly. "Knew you would. Rianne?"

Rianne looked far less certain. She looked from one to the other fearfully. "I don't want to die." she whispered.

"Nor do we." Luella said firmly.

"If Voldemort comes back, we'll be killed anyway." Deanna said quietly. "I'd rather go out fighting."

Rianne hesitated. Then, she too placed her hand on top of the others. "OK." she said quietly. Luella placed her other hand on top of theirs and gripped them tightly, looking into their eyes.

"Eternal, unceasing alliance against Lord Voldemort. Together, forever, on the Great Serpent. Are you with me?"

"On the Great Serpent." they said. Luella released them, sighing with relief.

"All right. Now here comes the strategic bit. Voldemort could well be in the school now. I certainly think he's nearby. But I don't think he's powerful enough to hurt me physically, not yet. He has, however, been attacking me psychically. That's why I collapsed this morning. If it hadn't been for Professor Snape..." She shuddered. "He got me out of there, took me to his office and taught me how to fight back. If it happens again, I'm ready. I might even hit back with a pre-emptive strike of my own. But that's not all I found out. I discovered two other things this morning, which are vital bits of information." She paused, watching them. They were hanging on her every word.

"First, is that Snape knows about me. He's under orders to look after me too. I know he's not universally popular with you all," here Marlie laughed derisively, "but I think you ought to know this. He's on our side. He's trustworthy. He'll help us if we let him. So if we need help from adults, go to him, understand? He's been there before, his mind's riddled with scars from the last Voldemort war. He knows. You don't have to like him, but do trust him."

Deanna rolled her eyes. "If you say so, Lu. Well, Mum's a friend of his, so he can't be all bad. What else?"

"Well, I just told you who we can trust. Here's who we can't. Professor Quirrell."

"Quirrell?" The three of them burst out laughing. Deanna was first to speak.

"Lu, how can Professor Quirrell be dangerous? Look at him. I've seen more intimidating Christmas cards."

"Yeah, that stutter's really frightening." laughed Marlie. "Come on Lu, the only scary thing about Quirrell is that turban with those robes."

Luella shook her head. "Wise up, you lot! That's exactly what he wants you to think. If you don't take him seriously, you don't notice him creeping up behind you, or have him down as an enemy."

"Lu, don't you think you're being just a bit paranoid?" Rianne asked gently. "He's a teacher, he's not going to be working for You-Know-Who, is he?"

"Snape thinks he is. I think so too. Come on, open your eyes! Where did my attack yesterday happen? Quirrell's lesson. Who was nearest to me at breakfast this morning when I had the attack then? Quirrell. When he tried to help me, it got worse, much worse, then stopped as soon as Snape made him leave me alone. And when Snape was

taking me to his office, Quirrell appeared again. And I had another attack, and that time it was the worst it had ever been. It didn't subside until Snape made Quirrell go away. I tell you, he's bad news."

The other three looked at each other. Luella seemed certain, almost fanatically so.

"OK." Deanna said. "We'll believe you. But all the same, Quirrell?"

Luella prepared for Monday's Defence Against the Dark Arts class with a grim feeling of excitement. It would be interesting to face Quirrell again; she'd not seen him since her attack on Saturday morning. Truth be told, she was rather looking forward to it.

So it was with a sense of disappointment that she learned that the lesson had been cancelled.

"Cancelled?" she asked, surprised. "Why?"

Lucas Vetinari shrugged. "Says he's ill, apparently. Should be back for Wednesday's lesson though."

"Oh." Luella said, disappointed. Deanna patted her on the shoulder. "Never mind, Lu. You'll get to demonstrate your anti-Dark Arts prowess eventually. Come on, might as well hit the library while we're waiting."

Luella browsed the Charms section idly. Her three friends were seated at a table around the corner. They were talking in low whispers, and Luella was under no illusions about what they were talking. She'd heard her name mentioned quite a few times. Turning away, her attention was caught by another set of voices behind her.

"Have you found anything yet?" a boy's voice, with a West Country accent rather like Marlie's, hissed in a low whisper.

"No." a girl replied. "Here, you get looking through these, see what comes up."

Luella smiled as she recognised them. Turning around, she saw Hermione Granger pulling some books off the shelf and passing them back to a rather fed up Ron Weasley.

"You two all right there?" she asked good-naturedly.

Ron and Hermione didn't say anything. They just looked back in shock. Hermione was first to recover.

"Hi, Lu." Hermione said gently. "How are you feeling now? Are you all right?"

Luella grinned and shook her head, letting her hair flow out backwards in a move she'd copied from Marlie.

"Never better. See, told you I'd be OK."

Hermione was not convinced. "Yes, but what was up on Saturday? You looked awful."

Luella did some extremely quick thinking. "That? Nothing to worry about. Some of my housemates thought it would be... amusing... to slip a hallucinogen to me without me knowing. Thought I was surrounded by Dementors. Professor Snape took me back to his office to give me the antidote. Rest assured those responsible have been dealt with." She grinned evilly. "Deanna and me got a posse together and kicked their arses into the next county."

Hermione laughed nervously. Ron looked extremely doubtful. Luella hastily changed the subject. "So what are you two after? I don't recall those being on the first year reading list." She indicated the books they were holding. Both Ron and Hermione suddenly started fidgeting and acting very suspiciously. Hermione looked as if she was thinking about what to do. Seeming to make her mind up, she answered first.

"Nothing much, just a little research into magical history. I've got so much to learn about the magical community, I thought I'd do a little background reading. I expect you had all this to do when you were a first year."

Luella smiled. "Yeah, I had a lot to learn. There's still a lot I don't know, even now. Is there anything in particular you wanted to know?"

Ron shot a sharp look at Hermione. Luella noticed immediately and gave her a quizzical look. Tell me, she thought. There's more going on here, isn't there? So tell me.

Hermione decided to speak. "Actually, there was one thing. Nothing really major or anything, I just heard it mentioned in passing and thought you might have heard something about it."

Ron glared at her. "Don't tell her, she might go straight to Snape!" he hissed. Hermione took a deep breath and ignored him.

"Lu, have you ever heard of a wizard called Nicolas Flamel?"

Luella thought hard. The name didn't ring any bells. "No. Sorry. I'll ask Deanna and Rianne for you, if you like. They grew up in magic households, they might have heard of him. Especially Deanna, she knows all sorts of magical history."

Ron held his head in his hands. Hermione smiled. "Thanks, Lu, that'd be really helpful. It's not important or anything, I'm just interested for the sake of it."

Luella smiled gently. "I'll go and ask them now." She turned and went back to the table. Her smile turned to an intrigued look as soon as she was out of sight. So this Nicolas Flamel was important, was he? Got to hand it to Hermione, she was good. Convincing as a Slytherin. Ron, on the other hand, couldn't have been more of a giveaway if he'd tried.

Luella sat down next to Rianne. "Ri, have you ever heard of a wizard called Nicolas Flamel?"

"No. Sorry. Never heard of him. Why?"

"Hermione wanted to know. Marlie, Deanna, either of you know anything?"

Marlie looked blank. Deanna, however, looked like she was thinking hard. "Actually, the name rings a bell. I think I read something about it not long ago. Did she say anything about what he might have done?"

"No, just the name."

"Nicolas Flamel, Nicolas Flamel. Familiar, but I can't think why. Let's see, I'm currently reading Tyler and Croft's *Famous Magicians of the Renaissance*. Co-authored by my great-grandmother, by the way. I'm sure he might have been mentioned..." She sat bolt upright. "Of course! He was in that weird chapter on alchemy that I skipped most of. Now I remember."

"Alchemy?" Luella sounded intrigued. "So what sort of alchemy did he do? Was he any good?"

"I should say so. Only known manufacturer of the Philosopher's Stone. Rumour has it he's still alive today."

"What's a Philosopher's Stone?" Marlie asked curiously.

"Weird alchemist thing used to prepare the Elixir of Life. Which can turn lead into gold and make you immortal." Rianne said matter-of-factly. "So why's Hermione interested in that?"

"You two aren't thinking of having a go at making one, are you?" Deanna grinned.

"Don't be silly, of course we're not." Luella laughed.

"Relieved to hear it. Most alchemists went completely nuts because of all the sulphur and mercury fumes. Hey, reckon Snape's one?" They all laughed.

Luella got up. "Hardly. He's sane enough. Twisted, but sane. Better go and pass the news on to her. See you guys." She headed off into the recesses of the library, her smile fading as soon as she was alone. The Philosopher's Stone? Hadn't Snape mentioned it to Filch the other night? The night they'd tried to investigate the forbidden corridor. Well, now she knew what the dog was guarding. She'd forgotten about that, what with the Voldemort attacks.

Voldemort. Oh hell. He was nearby, working with Quirrell. Her blood ran cold. The Stone could make you immortal. And hadn't she heard Snape asking Quirrell what he'd been doing the night Filch had alerted him to a possible theft?

She stood still, her head in a whirl. It all made sense now. The Stone was being guarded here at Hogwarts, in that corridor, with the dog and probably other things too protecting it. And Quirrell was trying to steal it for Voldemort so he could come back, at least that's what Snape thought. She looked frantically around. Hermione wanted to know about all this? And Ron, and presumably Harry.

Harry. She froze. Another one on the Voldemort hit list. Someone had already tried to kill him once. And Quirrell had been present at the time.

Luella thought briefly. Going to Snape was out of the question; while he'd go out of his way to help her, he'd be far less sympathetic to Gryffindors. However, if she could protect Harry, then she would. Without hesitating, she turned to seek out Hermione.

"Well?" Hermione asked eagerly. "Did you find anything?"

"Nope. Not a sausage. You'll have to keep on looking, won't you?" Luella said abruptly, before leaving a puzzled Hermione and a suspicious Ron behind her.

"So she just said she hadn't found anything and brushed you off, just like that?" Harry said, thoughtfully.

"Yes." said Hermione. "It was really strange, like she just wanted to get rid of me. That's not Luella at all. If she didn't know, she'd have told me more politely. That was more like Snape than Luella. It's like she knows something and doesn't want to discuss it."

"That's not good. Maybe you shouldn't have told her about Flamel." said Harry dubiously.

"Why?" Hermione snapped. "She's older, she's smart, she might have heard something about him! All I did was ask, I didn't tell her why we were looking or anything."

"That's not the point!" Ron said angrily. "Point is, if Snape has got her bewitched, he'll find out we're looking for Flamel and realise we're on to him."

"But he wouldn't bewitch a student, would he?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Who knows? He might have." Harry looked worried. "I mean, look at her. Saturday morning she's a complete wreck. Now she's confident, self-assured, and even Malfoy's walking in fear of her. You saw the four of them come in to breakfast this morning, the other three were flanking her like bodyguards, and Luella was in the middle looking like some kind of Mafia boss. Something's happened to her! And I bet Snape had something to do with it. Now she's given in to him, he's got her under his control and is making her feel braver."

Hermione shook her head. "Well, I still don't believe it. Luella didn't seem bewitched to me. Just very confident and together."

Harry sighed. "Well, it's too late now. We'll just have to hope she doesn't report back to him. If anyone asks, we just heard the name mentioned and were curious. Better, just say you wanted to know, Herm. They'll believe that you'd be researching stuff like that."

By Wednesday, Defence Against the Dark Arts was back on again. Luella glanced casually at Quirrell, who was sitting behind his desk trembling. No change there, then. Still in that daft purple turban, and those green robes. Marlie was absolutely right, they really didn't go.

Luella got her things out as the lesson began. Today, it was how to deal with Grindylows. Dull. Very dull. Luella gazed idly at Quirrell. Why had he been off sick? Did it have something to do with her fight-back on Saturday morning? Had it affected Quirrell that badly? Interesting. Very interesting. He was stuttering more than usual and did look very pale.

Luella smiled cruelly. Maybe she could put this theory to the test. Taking a few deep breaths, she focused her eyes on Quirrell's forehead and concentrated.

So you're the Dark Lord's chosen, are you? I'm surprised.

Quirrell froze. Hastily, he shook himself and continued talking. Luella just smiled and put the pressure on again, borrowing heavily from the kind of thing Snape liked to use on errant Gryffindors.

I must say, I'm rather disappointed. I thought Lord Voldemort had more style than that. What dire straits he must be in to have to choose the likes of you as a follower.

Quirrell's voice trailed off. He was visibly shaking, but Luella noticed something like anger in his eyes. Time to move in for the kill.

Whatever you're planning, it won't succeed, you know that, don't you. I will do whatever it takes to stop you and your master. You will fail him, as you've failed at everything else in your miserable existence, and he will show you no mercy. I will show you no mercy. Save your neck and come over to our side. Surrender!

She gazed straight into his eyes, mentally repeating the last word over and over again, putting every inch of her new-found power into it. Quirrell clutched his head suddenly, staggering back. He looked straight back at her, and this time it was fear not anger in his eyes. The rest of the class were on their feet in shock.

"Sir, are you all right?" Luella heard Lucas Vetinari asking. Luella smiled and broke off contact. Honour was satisfied. For now. Quirrell steadied himself.

"Y-yes, yes, I'm f-fine, V-v-vetin-n-nari." He shook himself. "If you w-would all l-like to s-s-settle d-down, we'll c-contin-n-nue the l-lesson."

Luella, still grinning, picked up her quill and continued taking notes. She noticed Deanna giving her a knowing look and Marlie raising an eyebrow. She winked at them before returning to work.

Last thing on Wednesdays was Potions. Snape generally ignored his students as they filed in, but this time he didn't take his eyes off Luella. She noticed this immediately and smiled at him. He acknowledged her, seeming rather relieved.

Luella took her seat at the back with Deanna and started taking notes on the potion they would be making today. The lesson proceeded smoothly enough, but Luella was constantly aware of Snape's eyes flickering towards her. Strangely, she found the attention rather flattering.

The lesson ended and they filed out. Luella, one of the last to leave, heard Snape's soft tones calling her back. She turned to see what he wanted.

"So how have you been, Miss Martin?" Snape asked coolly. "Have you had any further attacks?"

"None whatsoever. I think they've backed down. Scared of me." she grinned. Snape smiled.

"Well done, I'm impressed. Clearly you've taken my words to heart. You know Professor Quirrell was indisposed the other day?"

"Yeah, we had our lesson cancelled. What was really wrong with him, sir?"

"Alas, I am not privy to that information. However, I believe I can guess. I also noted at lunchtime that Quirrell has not entirely recovered - he'd just had a lesson with one of his third year classes and seemed quite flustered. Were you in that class by any chance?"

"Er... I might have been." Luella grinned.

Snape nodded, unsurprised. "You do learn fast, don't you? I've been watching you all week, I've noticed the change in you. Don't think it hasn't gone unnoticed by my colleagues either, Professor McGonagall asked me only this morning what on earth had happened to you. I told her I'd just given you a few words of advice about asserting yourself and left it at that."

"Is it that obvious?" Luella asked, alarmed.

"Absolutely. Last week, you were the quiet, unobtrusive one of your social circle. Now look at you. The undoubted leader. You're wearing your power like a cloak, and the whole school's noticing. I've heard your fellow students, and you yourself, asking

how on earth you ended up in Slytherin, that maybe you would have been better off in Ravenclaw or even Hufflepuff. I confess to having had doubts myself. No longer! You're walking, talking, looking like a Slytherin. Every move, every look, just says *beware*. And I'm proud of you. Very proud. Twenty points for Slytherin."

Luella blushed, but couldn't stop herself smiling. "Thank you, sir! Of course, I couldn't have done it without you, you know."

"Maybe. But don't underestimate yourself. All I did was show you your power, you are the one who picked it up and used it." He gazed at her, eyes burning fiercely. "Use it well, Luella Martin. Use it well."

Luella returned his gaze proudly, these strange new feelings of delight at his attention surging through her. "You have my word." she said softly. "You have my word."

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Chapter Nine An Unexpected Gift

The days passed swiftly. It was now December, and there was a palpable air of excitement. As if everyone could sense that Christmas was just around the corner.

Which, Luella thought, could only be a good thing. This winter was colder than usual. The lake had frozen solid, snow covered the ground, and there was little chance of owls getting anywhere. Those that did make it required Hagrid's tender ministrations before they could be put back in use.

Luella shivered. It never got this cold in Surrey, never. The Serpent's Nest was warm enough, but classes, especially Snape's, were a frozen nightmare. She had now taken to wearing the warm winter cloak that Mrs. Tyler had given her a few years back underneath her regulation black one.

"How do you manage it?" she hissed at Rianne, who seemed unaffected by the cold.

"I'm from the Welsh mountains, Lu." she replied nonchalantly. "It's always like this during winter."

Marlie, sitting next to her, groaned. "I hate winter." she complained. "Only good things are Christmas and my birthday. And I've just had one of them. Gods, why does this place have to be so perishingly cold? Have they not heard of central heating?"

"Wusses, all of you." Deanna said brusquely. "Come on, we need some action! Warm your soft English blood up. Marlie, you and me, how about a practice Quidditch session?"

Marlie leapt to her feet. "You're on. Let's go!" She ran off to get their brooms and cloaks.

Deanna turned to Luella and Rianne. "Fancy joining us?"

Rianne yawned lazily. "I might. Could do with the exercise."

"What about you, Lu?"

"No way." Luella said firmly. She'd never been at home on a broom, and no one had been gladder than her at the end of their first year, when Flying had ceased to be part of their curriculum. "If we were meant to fly, we'd have had wings. You're not getting me up on one of those things."

Deanna chuckled. "Suit yourself. You can watch. Keep score or something."

So it was that Luella found herself out on the Quidditch pitch, huddled next to a magical fire for warmth, watching Rianne, Marlie and Deanna play the stripped-down three-and-in version of Quidditch, involving two Chasers, one Keeper, one Quaffle,

and no Beaters, Bludgers, Seeker or Snitch. It lacked a certain excitement, Luella thought to herself as her friends flew high above her, Marlie and Deanna tackling each other while Rianne was in goal. Deanna's owl, Spooky, fluttered to perch on her shoulder.

"Hiya, Spooks." she muttered gently. No denying it, Spooky was a cute little owl. Not at all the sort of thing she'd thought Deanna would go for. The small, brown owl chirped gently. Luella grinned to herself.

Her mood was broken by a most unwelcome voice.

"Wearing a blue cloak during school hours, Martin? That's not allowed, you know. We ought to tell Professor Snape about that, oughtn't we?"

Draco. Flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Luella gritted her teeth.

"It's under my school cloak. And it's half past three. Not school hours anymore, Malfoy, so there." Luella heartily wished he'd go away.

"Talking rather bravely, aren't we, Martin?" Draco grinned. "You don't seem to realise you're outnumbered." In the fading light, Draco obviously hadn't noticed the three girls on brooms.

"Unlike you, Malfoy, I don't need my friends hanging around me as bodyguards in case someone decides to hit me. Now shut up and go away, unless you've got something interesting to say, which I sincerely doubt."

"Ooh!" Draco feigned fear. "Tough words. But can you back them up, Mudblood?"

Luella froze. The world seemed to stand still. From far away, she heard her own voice saying "What did you call me, Malfoy?"

And Draco's voice replying, deadly serious this time. "You heard me, Mudblood."

Luella didn't even hesitate. Before Draco could react, she reached back and punched him for all she was worth.

Draco fell back, stunned that a mere Muggle-born, and a female one at that, could hit so hard.

"What are you waiting for?" he hissed at Crabbe and Goyle, nursing his jaw. "Get her!"

Luella drew out her wand, ready for a fight. Spooky took to the air and began hooting madly, flying around in circles. Crabbe and Goyle advanced menacingly. They were cut short, however, by a Quaffle thrown at Crabbe's head. All of them turned to see where it had come from.

Deanna, Marlie and Rianne had evidently noticed what was going on, and were now bringing their brooms in. All three had their wands out.

"Leave her alone, Malfoy." Deanna called out threateningly.

Draco pulled himself to his feet, drawing his wand.

"Or you'll do what, Tyler?" he snarled.

"This." she said coolly, letting a hex go at him. Draco leapt aside, and let one fly back. Deanna dodged with ease. Spooky, however, had other ideas. Flying to the defence of his mistress, he went straight for Draco and began beating him in the face with his wings.

"Spooky, leave him, you'll get me in trouble!" Deanna shouted, shocked. Crabbe and Goyle immediately tried to go to Draco's aid, but he waved them off.

"Leave it, I can deal with this!" he snarled, before reaching out and grabbing Spooky round the throat. Squeezing the little bird hard he threw it back at Deanna. Spooky hit the frozen ground with a sickening thump. He fluttered briefly before lying still.

Deanna touched down next to the fallen owl and examined him. Marlie and Rianne joined her, stunned. Luella ran to see what had happened.

Rianne picked the owl up. "He's not moving. This doesn't look good."

"My owl, Malfoy." Deanna whispered furiously. "If you've killed my owl...!"

Draco, for once, looked genuinely shocked. "Killed him? I didn't mean to kill him!" He turned swiftly to Crabbe and Goyle. "Let's go. Quickly!" The three boys ran off back to the school, leaving the girls clustered around Spooky's limp form.

"You're doing Care of Magical Creatures, what do you think?" Luella asked Marlie in a hushed voice.

"Get him to Hagrid at once." Marlie said firmly. "There's no one knows more about animals than him."

However, it proved too late for the owl. Hagrid, after examining him carefully, apologised but said there was nothing he could do. The owl's neck was broken and it seemed kinder to put it out of its misery. Deanna assented numbly, and the four of them headed back, leaving Hagrid to get on with it.

Deanna didn't say much all evening, just sitting quietly on her own. There was, however, one benefit. Draco, while not exactly apologising, did evidently feel guilty about what had happened, and left them alone. He didn't even give them the usual condescending looks.

By bedtime, the shock seemed to have worn off. Deanna went to bed early, drew the curtains shut and didn't say anything to anybody. Luella, in the next bed, heard her crying softly that night, but didn't intervene. She debated briefly whether to ask Snape

for some more sleeping potion, but decided against it. Snape, while sympathetic to nightmares about Deanna's mother being tortured by Death Eaters, was unlikely to feel quite the same way about the death of an owl. Nor did Luella really feel like letting Deanna know she'd heard her crying. In the end, she decided to let her retain some shreds of dignity if nothing else, and went to sleep.

Rianne tried to persuade Deanna to get up the next morning.

"Come on, Deanna, we've got class. You'll get in trouble!"

"I'm not going." a muffled voice came from behind the curtains.

"Deanna, we've got Potions first thing!" Rianne said urgently. "How sympathetic do you think Snape's going to be?"

"I don't care. Not about Snape, not about anything else. I'm not going."

Rianne, exasperated, turned to Marlie and Luella. "Can you two do anything?"

Luella stepped forward. "Come on, Deanna. Come out. Show Malfoy he's not getting to you."

"Screw Malfoy." Deanna snapped bitterly. "Screw Snape. Screw the world. Just leave me alone."

Luella turned to the other two. "Come on, we'd better get a move on. No use trying to reason with her like this."

Snape noticed Deanna's absence almost immediately.

"Where is Miss Tyler today?" he said, irritably, looking sternly at Luella.

Luella looked helplessly at Marlie and Rianne, who just shrugged. Luella decided to try bluffing.

"She's not well." she said promptly.

"Not well?" Snape said disbelievingly. "She seemed perfectly healthy yesterday. And I don't believe I've seen her in the hospital wing."

Marlie chipped in. "She's a bit upset, sir. Suffered a bereavement recently."

Snape seemed to go pale. "A bereavement? Most of her family's dead. Who?"

Luella watched closely, thinking that it was a good thing Snape was sitting down, he looked like he was about to faint. It occurred to her that Deanna's only living relative was her mother. Which made Snape's shocked reaction... interesting.

"Draco Malfoy fatally injured her owl, sir." Rianne said levelly. Snape seemed to calm down at this. In fact, he now looked highly annoyed.

"Indeed." he said coldly. "Well, great as her grief must no doubt be, that is no excuse for missing my lesson. Tell her I will see her at the end of the school day." And with that, the subject seemed to be closed.

Deanna appeared to have regained her composure by lunch, and attended her afternoon Divination class as normal.

"Can't hide from the world forever." Deanna told Luella, trying to sound cheerful.

"Anyway, I wouldn't miss Trelawney's lessons for the world. Funniest thing in the school. I'm learning so much about how to con people, it's amazing."

"Deanna, you're meant to be uncovering your natural predictive abilities, not learning how to pull confidence tricks." Rianne said disapprovingly.

"If Trelawney had any natural predictive abilities, she'd be able to teach them to me, but as it is, I'll just have to content myself with scamming." Deanna said coolly.

"Talking of fast talking, you'll need it. Snape wants to see you at the end of the day. Wants to know why you missed his lesson." Luella told her.

"Oh hell." Deanna said, frustrated. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth." Rianne said firmly. "What else?"

"Oh gods." Deanna moaned. "What's wrong with you people? Why couldn't you have lied?"

"We tried." Marlie pointed out. "I did tell him you'd suffered a bereavement, but he would insist on knowing who it was."

"Bloody hell." Deanna grumbled. "Oh well, the worst he can do is give me detention. Come on, you two. Divination. See you, Ri. I predict at least one of your classmates will fall asleep during Muggle Studies."

"That always happens." Rianne laughed. "Nostradamus you are not."

Divination passed all too quickly, and Deanna found herself waiting outside Snape's classroom all too soon. Marlie and Luella wished her luck, before disappearing off to the common room.

Snape's fourth year class filed out, and Deanna slipped in. Snape was sitting at his desk, gathering assignments together.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she said, nervously. Snape gave her his most withering look.

"To be brutally honest, Miss Tyler, I would far rather have seen you this morning in my Potions class. What was so vitally important as to keep you away? Do tell me, it must have been riveting to have commanded you away from one of my lessons." Snape's voice dripped sarcasm.

"Sorry, sir." she mumbled. "I won't do it again."

"You still haven't told me where you were. I'm waiting, Miss Tyler."

"I didn't feel up to it, sir. Malfoy killed my owl yesterday, I couldn't face lessons."

"Indeed. Well, I shall have words with Mr. Malfoy's parents at a later date. Maybe some form of compensation can be arranged. However, that does not give you an excuse to miss lessons. Ten points from Slytherin, Miss Tyler. I shall expect you to have caught up on the work missed. I am sure Miss Martin or Miss Stormosi will be pleased to assist you. Now go."

"So he just took ten points off you, told you to catch up and that was it?" Rianne asked, open-mouthed.

"He was very sarcastic, if that makes any difference." Deanna volunteered. "In fact, he was verging on irony."

Marlie and Luella both winced. A verbal lashing from Snape was worth thirty points lost and a detention from anyone else.

"Well, I still think he was a bit soft on you." Rianne sniffed. "By his standards anyway."

Finally, term ended and the Christmas holidays began. As the four Slytherins staggered off the Hogwarts Express and onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters, Marlie gathered them all together to finalise arrangements for the holidays.

"Right, now you will all come round ours for our Christmas soiree, won't you?" Marlie said forcefully.

"Course we will." Deanna assured her. "Mum's going, so I can't really say no, can I? Lu, you're invited as well, Mum told me to tell you. Come round our house, we're going by Floo. Same time as usual, Marls?"

"As usual. Ri, you and Kat coming?" Marlie asked.

"Try keeping us away. I suppose your mum will have invited the Weasleys along?"

"Not this year, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are in Egypt with Bill and their youngest Ginny, Charlie's in Romania, the rest of the boys are still at Hogwarts. Not the usual banquet, I'm afraid." Marlie sighed.

"All the more for us then." Deanna said, unconcerned. "And no Fred and George to keep an eye on, yippee!"

As the two girls climbed into the back of the Martins' Volvo, Mrs. Martin turned to greet them warmly.

"How was school then, dears?"

"Could have been better." Deanna sighed. "Gryffindor have got a new Seeker for their team and we got thrashed, and my owl's died, but apart from that, fine."

Mrs. Tyler, seated in the front passenger seat, turned to look at her exasperatedly. "Deanna, I've told you time and time again to take better care of your pets! What happened?"

"It wasn't her fault, Mrs. Tyler." Luella said softly. "Spooky got injured by another student."

"Which one?" Mrs. Tyler asked.

"Draco Malfoy." the two girls said in unison.

"Who?" Mrs. Martin asked in confusion.

"Draco Malfoy. Yes, that is his real name." Mrs. Tyler said, amused. "The Malfoys are an old and well-known magical family. I gather Draco and Deanna don't get on very well. Deanna, why did he go for your owl? If it's his fault, I'll see if I can get compensation off his father. Goodness knows he can afford it."

"Spooky attacked him after he tried to hex me. Malfoy hit back and accidentally killed him."

Mrs. Tyler immediately looked stern. "Deanna, I hope you weren't getting in fights again."

"He called Luella a Mudblood, mum! What was I meant to do?"

"He called her what? Never mind." Mrs. Tyler said hastily. "We'll talk later. Sorry about that, Celia." She smiled at Mrs. Martin, who was looking rather bemused. "Deanna's temper, always getting her in trouble. Although from what I've heard of Malfoy, he does like to provoke her. Still, no harm done."

"I should hope not." Mrs. Martin said stiffly. "Luella, I hope you've been behaving yourself."

"Of course I have!" Luella said innocently, deciding not to mention punching Draco or exploring out-of-bounds corridors. Or, for that matter, fighting a troll. Or psychically attacking teachers. Deanna grinned at her, clearly remembering all four incidents. Luella decided to change the subject. "Mum, can I go over to Marlie's on Christmas Day?"

"What time?" her mother asked.

"Four o'clock." Deanna told her. "We'll take her, no problems there."

"But if she lives in Devon and you're leaving at four..." Mrs. Martin sounded troubled.

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "We've got ways of getting there and back. Luella will be back at a reasonable hour. They've got a phone too, you can call if there's any trouble."

"I like Marlie's house." Deanna said reflectively. "Mum, can we have a phone?"

"You don't need one, dear." Mrs. Tyler said firmly. Deanna sulked, but did not press the point.

"Now, you will behave, won't you dear?" Mrs. Martin asked Luella anxiously as she got ready to leave.

"Yes, Mum."

"And you will phone us if there's a problem?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And you will be back by ten o'clock, won't you?"

"Yes, Mum. Don't fuss, I'm only going to Marlie's. Her mum runs the DDAE, it's the safest house in the country." Luella said irritably as she pulled her coat on.

"What's the DDAE, then?" her father asked.

"Department of Dark Arts Eradication. Magic police force. Mrs. Tyler works for them."

"Sounds rather Orwellian." Mr. Martin remarked. "Are you sure you'll be alright? Don't want you coming home brainwashed."

"Oh, Dad. You're being paranoid. They're a perfectly nice family. You've met Marlie, haven't you? Does she seem brainwashed to you?"

Mr. Martin looked as if he were going to make a less than flattering comment about her, but a look from Mrs. Martin stopped him.

"Ignore him, dear, he's just fed up because we have to attend that wretched party at the Dursleys."

"Can't you tell them you're not going?" Luella asked. The Dursleys were neighbours of theirs, and Vernon Dursley was one of her father's main clients, hence the need to attend their parties. Luella had not been to their house often, but she'd been bored every time. For some reason, the Dursleys didn't seem to like her, although that could be because of all the fights she and Deanna had got in with their son Dudley. Not to mention one memorable occasion when she'd managed to make the dinner table collapse. She'd not been back since. "Come to the Lovegoods' instead. Marlie's dad's Muggle too, you won't feel too out of place. They've got a TV and a stereo and everything."

Mrs. Martin sighed. "Not that simple, dear. You run along, have fun at your party. Give our love to all your friends. And remember, no using magic!"

"I know." Luella sighed. "Anyway, I've got the head of the DDAE watching my every move, I'm not likely to, am I?"

Her parents looked sceptical but did not push the point. Luella said goodbye, and headed off to Deanna's.

Deanna waved as Luella entered their front room.

"Hello! All set for an evening of fun, frolics and feasting?"

"Absolutely. I've been looking forward to this for ages. I've not been before."

"Such bad luck you had flu last year. Never mind. You managed to avoid Fred and George's Homing Mistletoe, which can only be a good thing. Mind you, you also missed Marlie kneeing Fred in the groin after he sent it after her once too often." Deanna grinned.

Luella was spared answering by Mrs. Tyler's entrance. She looked stunning, in a blue velvet dress that offset her honey-coloured hair and brown eyes magnificently.

"Hi, Luella!" she smiled warmly. "Merry Christmas! How've you been?"

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Tyler." Luella said automatically. "You look very smart."

"Ah well, I do like to dress up for these things. Looking forward to the party?"

"Too right. Well, the alternatives are an afternoon on my own or a visit to these clients of Dad's."

"Is FBD still as fat as he used to be?" Deanna grinned.

"According to Mum, fatter. She's always complaining about how Vernon and Petunia spoil that boy."

Mrs. Tyler changed from motherly to alert in an instant. "Vernon and Petunia?" she said sharply.

"The Dursleys. Live round the corner in Privet Drive. With their awful son, Dudley. You must remember them, Deanna got in trouble for allegedly attacking him once."

"Oh, I remember them alright." Mrs. Tyler said softly. "So just the three of them, the parents and their son?"

"As far as I know. Dad reckons they did have a nephew, but he's a bit funny in the head, apparently. No one sees much of him. Spends most of the year at some kind of institution. Mum keeps saying what a shame it is about him. Mrs. Tyler, is something wrong, wait a second. A nephew living with them?" It dawned on Luella who the Dursleys' mysterious nephew was. "*Harry?*"

Mrs. Tyler had gone very pale and tight-lipped. "You guess correctly." she said firmly.

Deanna looked stunned. "They said that? About Harry Potter? *Weak in the head?* Some kind of *institution?* Now wait a minute, that's my school they're talking about!"

Mrs. Tyler seemed deeply grieved. "Children, you know all about how certain mages look down on certain other mages of Muggle origins, and indeed the Muggles themselves. Well, there are some Muggles who deserve the prejudice. Muggles who hate anything different from themselves, anything they can't understand, and whose instinctive reaction is to crush it before it grows. And I'm very much afraid the Dursleys are among them."

"Is there nothing you can do?" Luella whispered. "You're an Auror, there must be something."

Mrs. Tyler shook her head. "No. Trust me, I've tried. But he's living with a Muggle family, there's no Dark magic being used, they're his legal guardians and the Ministry doesn't want to get involved. Many times I've thought of intervening, but there's nothing I can do. The Muggle establishment's no use either, the Dursleys are too well respected. They'd wriggle their way out of it somehow and I fear for what they'd do to Harry afterwards." She looked gently at both girls and was back in her charming, motherly mode again. "You know, girls, I know you may not think much of the families you ended up in sometimes. No, don't protest, I've heard you two talking about how you'd like to swap parents before now. But this I tell you, you've got your own parents to look after you and love you like no one else ever will. You two are

both very fortunate indeed, that you've got parents who accept you just the way you are. I don't think you know how lucky you are, sometimes." Mrs. Tyler looked saddened. Luella looked at her with concern. Deanna, however, responded with her usual emotional sensitivity.

"Not that lucky. Luella's parents nearly didn't let her go to Hogwarts. And I'd like to have seen your reaction if I'd turned out to be a Squib." she laughed.

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "I'd still have loved you anyway. Besides, you're not a Squib, are you? And as for Luella, her parents don't seem to mind anymore. They're letting her go to this party at Mel's, which is more than the Dursleys would have done. But I digress. Deanna, is the fire ready?"

"Roaring away nicely. Got the Floo powder?"

"Right here." Mrs. Tyler produced a bowl of green Floo powder. Luella groaned inwardly. The Floo network was the magical equivalent of public transport, and just about the only way to get anywhere if you couldn't Apparate yet. This had not endeared it in anyway to Luella, who still couldn't get used to the idea of walking into a roaring furnace of naked flames. Mrs. Tyler threw a handful of powder into the fire, turning it green. "You first, Deanna."

Deanna got up, her black velvet robes rustling as she did so. Luella blinked in surprise. Deanna normally wore Muggle clothes at home. Clearly this was an occasion for dressing up witchy style. She began to wish she'd worn something a little smarter than jeans and a black t-shirt with denim shirt. Even if they were her best jeans. Deanna stepped confidently into the green flames and called out "Lovegood Farm, Chudley." She disappeared in a flash. Mrs. Tyler smiled encouragingly at Luella and held out the Floo powder. Gulping, Luella took a handful and cast it into the fire. Closing her eyes, she stepped into the dancing flames, feeling them warm against her skin. She took a deep breath and went for it. "Lovegood Farm, Chudley!"

The Tyler house vanished. She found herself swept along what seemed like a passageway, glimpsing lots of fires off to the side with Christmas scenes in each one. She was flung around corners, first left, then right, then left again, then a long straight passage for what seemed like forever. Suddenly, a light loomed up in the distance, growing steadily larger. She was flung into it at speed and the world went black.

Rubbing her eyes, she stumbled forward. Hands grasped her and supported her. Blinking, she gazed around her as the world swam into focus.

"Not the world's best traveller, are you, Lu?" Deanna commented knowingly. Luella looked up into Deanna's laughing black eyes. On her other side, Mrs. Lovegood helped her get to her feet.

"Leave her alone, Deanna, she's only been using the Floo for two years. She'll get used to it soon, I'm sure. How are you, dear?"

"Fine, thanks." Luella gasped as she steadied herself. "Hello, Mrs. Lovegood."

"Hello, and Merry Christmas! You've not seen our house decorated before, have you?"

Luella looked around at what she recognised as the Lovegood's music room. While the Lovegood house was no mansion by any means, it was an old farmhouse with lots of extensions and outbuildings which had been attached to the main building, all of which gave it the impression of being far bigger than it actually was. Luella thought it was the best house she'd ever been in. Made even better by the Lovegoods' extravagant Christmas decorations, a bizarre combination of the best that the magic and Muggle worlds had to offer. Luella thought it resembled a cross between Harrods and a Victorian Christmas card.

"It's gorgeous!" she breathed. "It looks amazing."

"You've not seen the outside yet. Looks like Cinderella's Castle as decorated by someone with no taste. Visible from Wales. Aeroplanes are having to divert their flight paths because the light keeps distracting the pilots. I'm amazed the council, never mind the Ministry, haven't been onto us yet." Marlie said, watching from the doorway in amusement. Luella noticed with dismay that she too was decked out in purple robes which set off her white-blonde hair marvellously.

"Another one in robes. Marlie, is there nothing that doesn't suit you?"

Marlie thought for a moment. "Yellow. And white. And beige. Better dead than wearing khaki. That's about it. Merry Christmas, by the way. How are you both?"

Rianne stuck her head over Marlie's shoulder. She too was in robes, dark green in her case. "You made it then. Come on in, save me from Marlie's dad. Some idiot gave him a camcorder for Christmas."

Mrs. Lovegood glanced up. A swooshing noise from the fire announced Mrs. Tyler's arrival. "Caitlin! Lovely to see you again, how was your journey?"

"No trouble at all, thank you. And how are you and Leonard keeping?"

"We're absolutely fine."

Luella heard Mrs. Tyler lowering her voice. "So, is Severus invited?" Luella immediately wandered a little closer, intrigued.

"I asked him. He declined. Why, Caitlin, is that disappointment I see in your eyes?"

"No." Mrs. Tyler said, just a little too firmly. "So, Mel, tell me what you've got planned for us tonight."

Luella moved away again, feeling a little disappointed herself. While the two women were exchanging the usual seasonal pleasantries, Marlie recalled her role as daughter of the hostess and passed round a tray of nibbles.

"Vol-au-vents, anyone?"

Deanna took one, eyebrow raised. "Vol-au-vents? Marlie, they're cheese and pineapple cubes on cocktail sticks. In a foil-covered jacket potato carved to look like a hedgehog. Haute cuisine they are not."

Marlie looked rather offended. "I spent ages on that potato. Look, do you want one or not?"

Luella took one. "They may not be French, but they'll do me. Nice potato, by the way."

Marlie's brother, unofficial Slytherin heart-throb Mike Lovegood, stuck his head round the door. "Hey, you four, fancy a game of Monopoly? Slytherin style, of course."

"Count me in!" Deanna yelled.

"And me!" Rianne called out.

"I don't know, I might leave you lot to it. Let you get on with your scheming and double-dealing in peace." Luella said. Slytherin Monopoly generally involved more corruption, double-crossing and dirty tricks than a US election.

"Be miserable if you will, then." Mike shrugged. "Hey, that leaves a piece available, if it's just me, Marlie, Kat, Rianne and Deanna. Mum, want to join in?"

"Oh, very well. After all, it is Christmas." Mrs. Lovegood followed them out. Mrs. Tyler watched them go out and turned to Luella. Her smile faded a little.

"Luella, can we talk?"

Luella, her heart sinking, nodded. She could guess what this would be about. Mrs. Tyler led her off into one of the Lovegood's numerous side rooms and sat down on a couch, closing the door behind her. On the other side of the door, Luella heard the first cry of outrage as one of the Monopoly players got mercilessly knifed in the back by another.

"Mum! You're fixing the dice again! Stop it! Dad, tell her!"

"Mel, stop cheating your own children. It's only a game."

"It is not only a game. It's preparation for life. Leonard, put that camcorder thing down. It's off-putting- oh! Thanks, Leonard, you've just let Deanna escape from one of my properties without paying rent."

"Preparation for life, Auntie Mel. Like you said."

Mrs. Tyler smiled benevolently, listening to them argue. "Reminds me of when we used to play Monopoly at school. Mel frequently won then too. Unless Severus was playing. I remember one memorable occasion when a game went on for three days after everyone else had been wiped out, just those two trying to outdo each other."

Can't remember who won." Nostalgia turned to mild concern. "So. Severus tells me you've had an interesting time this term."

Luella shuffled uneasily. "That's one way of putting it. Mrs. Tyler, is it true? Is You-Know-Who, I mean, is Voldemort really coming back?"

Mrs. Tyler sighed sorrowfully. "I don't know, Luella. It's a possibility, but as yet we've no real proof. At least, not until recently." She fixed Luella with a piercing stare. "So is it true what Severus tells me? Were you really under psychic attack?"

Luella nodded. "Certainly felt like it. And..." she looked up. "I think it was him. Voldemort."

"I was afraid of that." Mrs. Tyler sighed. "I've spent the last few weeks hoping and praying to every god there is, that it wasn't true. But I hear you resisted quite well. Indeed, I'm told you even fought back."

Luella grinned, relishing the memory. "Oh yes. And it felt good."

"Excellent. We'll make a Slytherin of you yet. You've certainly made an impression on Severus, he seemed quite pleased with you."

Luella felt her heart skip a beat. "Was he? Really?"

"Oh yes." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Kept going on about how we couldn't lose, not now we had you on side. He's proud of you. Very proud. I think it's his paternal instincts, they've nowhere else to go. So. Do you trust him now?"

Luella nodded, eyes shining. "Absolutely. He's on our side, isn't he?"

"Of course he is. And I can't believe you would think otherwise. He was very hurt after your confrontation at Halloween."

Luella's jaw dropped. "You know about that?"

"Of course I know. It's my job to know these things. Severus told me. He tells me just about everything that's going on at Hogwarts, especially where it concerns you and Deanna."

"Oh god." Luella said quietly. "Everything?"

"Everything he knows about." Mrs. Tyler said meaningfully. She lowered her voice. "Luella, is Deanna really having nightmares?" she asked fearfully.

Luella gulped. On the one hand, she didn't want to worry Mrs. Tyler. On the other, she certainly didn't want to have to admit the truth.

"Er, not really. Not any more. I think it was just the once." Luella said hastily.

"Good." Mrs. Tyler said, relieved. "I've put that poor child through enough, I couldn't bear the thought... Anyhow. Severus and I have been told by Mel to keep an eye on you, protect you and give any assistance we can in doing what you have to. He's looking after you at school, I'm checking up on you during the holidays, and we've been told to work together and keep each other informed so we know what's going on. Luella, I want you to know that if you have any problems, if you ever need help, that we're here for you. I'm only over the road, and while you're on holiday, you're my top priority. And Severus will drop anything he's doing if you need him. Don't ever think that you're alone in this, Luella. You have allies. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded. Impulsively, she reached out and hugged Mrs. Tyler. "Thanks. You know, I wish you were my mum sometimes. I get on far better with you than I do with mine."

Mrs. Tyler laughed. "Ah, Luella, you'd change your mind if I actually was! Kids, you always prefer your friends' families to your own, don't you?"

Luella laughed. However, this mention of her friends' families reminded her of something. Something she'd meant to ask her. Something about...

"Mrs. Tyler," she began, "did Professor Snape ever..."

Mrs. Tyler waited patiently. Luella hesitated then plunged in regardless.

"Did he ever work for Voldemort? When he was younger?"

Mrs. Tyler immediately went very tight-lipped, and Luella knew she'd hit very close to the truth.

"You don't need to know about his past, Luella. All you need to know is that since Voldemort fell, and before, he's been a trusted ally, and will continue to be one. Look, one day, I'll tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Severus Snape. But not yet. Not yet."

Luella nodded. "But he's definitely working for us now?"

"Well, of course he is. Didn't I just tell you Mel wants him watching over you?"

"Is he doing anything else for her?"

"Like what? Luella, even if he is, it's not a concern of yours, is it now?"

Luella decided to plunge in and ask the question on her mind. "Mrs. Tyler, is he watching over the Philosopher's Stone?"

Mrs. Tyler lost all her usual warmth in an instant. "Keep your voice down, child!" she hissed. "That's top secret, ultra-classified information, how on earth did you find out about that?"

"Overheard Snape mention it to Filch. And worked out why I could feel Voldemort around once I found out what it was. He's after it, isn't he? Him and Quirrell. He wants it so he can become immortal and take over again, doesn't he?"

"Great Mother, child, is there anything you don't know? Well, for Hera's sake keep quiet about it. And stay out of things. It's far too dangerous for you to be involved. Just let Severus and I get on with our jobs."

Luella was prevented from saying anything else by Marlie's sudden entrance. "Alright in there, you two? Come and join the rest of us, socialise. The game turned a bit nasty after Mike and Deanna were exposed as having formed an alliance against the rest of us, then Mum managed to somehow set up this brilliant move which simultaneously bankrupted all five of us. I'm sure she cheats, you know. Anyway, we're handing round the presents now so if you want yours, come and get 'em!"

Mrs. Tyler, seemingly glad of an excuse to cut that particular conversation short, steered Luella back into the main room, where everyone else was handing around parcels.

The gift-giving went on for some time, what with everyone having brought at least five presents each, and in some cases more. Finally, everyone appeared to have given out everything to everybody.

Mrs. Lovegood sat back with a sigh. "I think that's everything. Alright, now that everyone has all their wonderful new toys, why don't we go and sample the wonderful buffet that Sukey's laid on for us?"

They were interrupted by a tapping at the window. Mrs. Lovegood tutted irritably.

"Who on earth is owling us on Christmas Day? And why hasn't the owl gone to our Owlery? Marlie, go and see who it's from."

Marlie did so, shrieking in shock as she opened the window. For it was no owl that had come to them.

"What on earth...?" Mrs. Lovegood gasped as what looked to Luella's untrained eyes like a bird of prey swooped majestically across the room to land squarely on Deanna's shoulder. Clutched in its talons was a roll of parchment which the stunned girl took.

"What is it, Mum?" Mike asked in awe. "And can I have one?"

"It's a peregrine falcon, and no you cannot. They're a nightmare to train and cost a fortune. You'd have to be a Birdmaster to own one." Mrs. Lovegood snapped. "Caitlin, do you know what this is about?"

Mrs. Tyler grinned. "Maybe. Although I can't say for certain. What's in your letter, Deanna?"

Deanna unfurled her parchment and gasped. "Oh my god! Lu, take a look at that!"

Luella took it from her and read. Behind her, everyone else crowded round to take a look.

The letter was as follows:

Dear Miss Tyler,

As promised, your replacement post bird. Happily, Mr. Malfoy Snr. agreed to pay a sizeable amount of compensation for the loss of your previous pet, allowing me to acquire something rather more special than a mere owl. You always did seem like the type of person who likes to stand out from the crowd. This will most certainly ensure you do just that. Her name is Clytemnestra, but she answers to Nestra. She's only a couple of years old, so you will have the pleasure of her well into your adult life. I doubt even Mr. Malfoy will dare to raise a hand to this fine creature.

I hope this will go some way towards making up for the loss of your previous familiar.

Seasons Greetings,

Professor Snape

PS. Don't worry about bringing her to Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore has given special permission for you to have her.

"Snape sent you a *peregrine falcon*?" Marlie gasped. "Blimey, Deanna, what did you do to get in his good books?"

Mrs. Lovegood was open-mouthed. "Caitlin, how did Severus manage to afford one of them? I very much doubt Lucius sent two hundred Galleons by way of compensation."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Did you not know Severus can talk to birds? Granted he gets his best results with ravens, but I'm sure he's capable of taming a falcon if needs be."

"Professor Snape went to all that trouble over you?" Rianne gasped, amazed. "Wow, Deanna, he must really like you!"

"If you're really nice to me, I might ask him to get you one." Deanna grinned. "Wow, a peregrine falcon. She's so gorgeous! Aren't you, Nestra, eh? You're a beautiful bird, aren't you?"

Clytemnestra flapped her wings and called out. Settling down, she began nuzzling Deanna's ear.

"She likes you, Deanna." Mrs. Tyler smiled.

"You reckon?" Deanna sighed hopefully. "Oh, I so hope I can train her! She's magnificent!"

"Yes, well." Mrs. Lovegood said somewhat tetchily. "Why don't you send her up to our Owlery to rest and feed for a while before she makes the journey back to your house. You can't take her via Floo powder, after all."

"Alright then." Deanna said reluctantly, clearly unwilling to part with such a fine animal. Taking Nesta back to the open window, she whispered to the falcon, "You heard that? Fly up to the Owlery, there's food and things there. Then go straight back to my house in Surrey. You wouldn't like the Floo. OK? See you soon, Nesta."

The bird took off into the darkness. Deanna closed the window and returned to join the others, who were all talking excitedly about how Deanna would be the talk of Hogwarts. Only Luella remained silent. The gift of a falcon went far beyond what was expected of Snape as a teacher. She looked at Deanna with a lump of fear in her stomach. It's not true, she thought, it can't be. But that gift was the final piece in the jigsaw. Deanna was Professor Snape's child. Luella hung her head. While Snape was almost certainly on their side now, it obviously hadn't always been that way. Luella glanced at Deanna, overjoyed at her new present and boasting about how sick Malfoy was going to be when he saw her. Please, please, she thought, don't warm to him, Dee! Don't get too close. Or you're going to get so very, very hurt...

Their return to Hogwarts found them in a much better mood than when they left it. It wasn't long before word got out that Deanna Tyler had acquired a peregrine falcon, and soon the entire house wanted to see it. Deanna, never one to resist showing off, took to giving demonstrations on the Quidditch pitch, which Nesta seemed to revel in as much as her owner did.

It was only a few days into the term. Deanna had taken Nesta for an exercise session. Rianne and Luella, their eyes glued to the sky despite the cold, watched in awe as Nesta executed flying moves worthy of a Seeker. Marlie, eager to show off, had fetched her broom from her dorm and joined her, girl and falcon in a stunning aerobatic display.

Luella had to admit, it was an impressive sight. Despite Mrs. Lovegood's warning that they were near impossible to train, Nesta had taken to Deanna immediately. Most of the holidays had been spent taking her on Epsom Downs for flying sessions. Luella recalled watching the falcon soaring high above them, diving and banking marvellously, dodging in and out of the kites and model aeroplanes that were the more usual inhabitants of the sky above the Downs before gliding in to land on Deanna's outstretched wrist. It was really rather surprising how well they'd bonded. Nesta seemed to understand every word Deanna said to her, always came when called, and needed no jesses, hood or leash to stay near her mistress. In fact, Nesta seemed content to spend most of her time perched on Deanna's shoulder when not delivering messages or hunting.

"Blimey, Tyler, what on earth have you got there?" Fred Weasley's awed voice came from behind them. The Weasley twins were standing there and had been watching for some time.

"Hey, Weasleys." Deanna grinned. "Like my new messenger bird? Nestra the peregrine falcon. Christmas present."

"I'll say." George whispered, impressed. "Those things cost a fortune, who died and left you that much?"

"And how'd you train it?" Fred asked in amazement. "How long did it take to teach her to do that?" Marlie had tossed a borrowed Golden Snitch into the air, which Nestra had caught almost immediately.

Deanna coughed. "Oh, erm, ages. Yeah. Really tough, but Nestra's very intelligent and we bond so well, its unbelievable."

"Well, we are jealous and outraged that you managed to get one. And when we're millionaires, we're buying three of them." said George.

"When you're millionaires?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "You are ambitious. Thought that was meant to be our territory."

"Yeah, you'd better watch it, or they might make you transfer." Luella teased.

"Never." Fred grinned. "If they tried to put us in Slytherin, we'd leave."

"If they tried to put you in Slytherin, so would we." Deanna responded.

"Ooh, touche, Tyler." grinned George. "And on that note, we'll leave you to your little Air Fair. See you in Potions." The twins took themselves off.

Their next visitors, however, were far less welcome. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle slunk over to see what was going on.

"Lovegood's risking her neck a bit, isn't she?" Draco drawled. "We don't want her to have an accident, we won't win the Cup without her. Although if she makes a habit out of helping other Seekers to the Snitch..."

"She'll be fine." Deanna said shortly. "She knows what she's doing. Malfoy, unless you have something to tell me, stop interrupting. I'm trying to exercise my new messenger bird."

Draco noticed the falcon, and his pale face flushed with jealousy. "That's a peregrine falcon, Tyler. I wasn't aware we were allowed to bring them to school. A cat or a toad or an owl, it said in my Hogwarts letter."

Deanna turned to glare coldly at him. "Well, my original familiar was an owl, wasn't he? But seeing as someone killed my last bird," she gave Draco her coldest look yet, causing him to squirm and look away, "I've been allowed to acquire a new, rather more unique one."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but never got the chance. Professor Snape's silky tones cut through the January air.

"I see your new familiar is causing quite a stir, Miss Tyler."

They turned. Professor Snape was watching Marlie and Nestra chase each other across the sky. He wasn't exactly smiling, but the ghost of amusement played over his features.

Draco spoke up first. "Sir, she's got a peregrine falcon. We're not allowed them, sir. Are you going to confiscate it?"

Snape slowly lowered his eyes to meet Draco's. The boy shrank back.

"Given that it is thanks to your efforts that Miss Tyler no longer has an owl, I hardly think you are in any position to pass judgement on what she chooses to replace it with. As a matter of fact, Professor Dumbledore has given permission for her to have a falcon, on condition it does not accompany her to class and lives in the Owlery. Now. Don't you have schoolwork to be getting on with?"

Draco muttered something and slunk off, Crabbe and Goyle in tow. Snape returned to gazing at Nestra.

"She appears to respond well to Miss Lovegood." he said, fascinated.

"Yeah, she likes Marlie. Likes Lu and Rianne too. She's good like that. She's the best present I've ever had. Thank you, sir!" Deanna turned to Snape, eyes shining.

Snape shrugged. "It was nothing. Your mother suggested getting something different, so a peregrine falcon it was. Your ancestors used to breed them, did you know? It's on their ancestral coat of arms."

Rianne gasped and turned to Deanna. "You're descended from the Tal-y-Rhys family? No way!"

Deanna squirmed. "Not something I really think about much." she murmured, embarrassed.

"You should." Snape said absently. "They're an ancient and noble family whose history stretches right back to the first humans to live in these islands. Older than the Malfoys, much older. Salazar Slytherin's mother was one, as was his first wife. And one of their specialities was being able to talk to birds. In particular, peregrine falcons. Watch." He held out his arm and called something in a language none of them knew. Immediately, Nestra turned and came in to land on his wrist, nuzzling his ear gently.

Rianne's jaw dropped even further. "You're a Birdmaster!"

"It's not something I make much of. A little known talent of mine. There's Tal-y-Rhys blood on my mother's side. But it's a nice thing to have. Of course, it does help that I trained her myself."

Deanna looked dumbfounded. "But that means... she's yours, surely! I can't take something that's yours. You have her back."

Snape shook his head and allowed Nesta to fly back to Deanna. "She's not mine. She never really has been. Prefers witches. Keep her. I already have a familiar. Good day." He turned and left. Marlie came in to land.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Snape was demonstrating how he can talk to birds, and how both he and Deanna have Tal-y-Rhys ancestry." Rianne told her.

"Tal-y-Rhys?" Marlie seemed unimpressed. "Hardly something to boast about, half of them were dark mages, and the rest were killed or changed their name. Guess that's why you're called Tyler now. Come on, let's go in, I'm freezing."

Rianne assented and they went indoors. But Luella couldn't help noticing that Deanna looked less happy about Clytemnestra than before.

Deanna knocked gingerly on Snape's office door, and entered. Snape glanced up, and raised an eyebrow.

"Twice in one day, and not even a class together. What have I done to deserve this pleasure?" He took in Deanna's dejected features. "Miss Tyler? Is there a problem?"

Deanna, with a heavy heart, placed Nesta's cage on his desk. Nesta flapped her wings fretfully.

"I can't accept this, Professor." Deanna said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Why not?" Snape asked, alarmed. "Don't you like her?"

"Of course I do, she's beautiful." Deanna whispered painfully, sliding into the chair opposite. "But sir, she must have cost you a fortune! Then there's all the time you put in training her. Why on earth should you give something so precious to me? I'm just a student of yours. An ordinary owl would have done!"

"No it wouldn't." Snape said harshly. "The Tal-y-Rhys heiress, own anything other than a peregrine falcon? Don't look so shocked, you are, you know. You and your mother are the last remaining members of the only family that genuinely can trace it's origins to them."

"I'm not even legitimate!" Deanna snapped.

"You don't have to be. Under Tal-y-Rhys law, inheritance passes from mother to daughter. Paternity doesn't enter into it. Caitlin Tyler's the direct firstborn female descendant of the White Lady Rhiannon Tal-y-Rhys herself. You're a Tal-y-Rhys. And you're having a peregrine."

"But, sir, you don't understand, I can't take something that you've put so much time and money into rearing. I feel bad about it. At least let me pay you."

"NO!" Snape snarled at her. Deanna recoiled in wounded surprise. Snape immediately regretted shouting at her. "You overestimate me, child." he said, rather more gently. "I never reared her. She's a wild bird. I hand-reared her grandmother when I was a boy, and members of that family line have occasionally visited me ever since.

Clytemnestra has been content to join me when I've been out in the wilderness collecting Potions ingredients from time to time, and spend time with me, but she's never been mine. She's never obeyed any command I've ever given her, or carried my letters. That is essentially an untamed, wild falcon you have there. One who has sacrificed that freedom to serve the Tal-y-Rhys heiress. Believe me, Deanna, if I had told her to take that letter to you and be your pet, she would not have done so. She offered. And I tell you, even if you leave her here now, the moment I release her, she'll fly straight back to you. You will have a very tricky time trying to get rid of her, I can assure you."

Deanna sighed resignedly. "You're not going to take her off me, are you?"

"Hardly. Release her in the grounds. See how long it is before she comes back."

Deanna got up. "All right. You win. I'll keep her. I'll let her go tonight, and if she flies in tomorrow at breakfast, I'll consider her mine and never bother you with it again."

"That's more like it." Snape said, smiling. "Honestly, the Tal-y-Rhys heiress trying to give away the family emblem. Rhiannon Tal-y-Rhys must be turning in her grave."

Deanna picked Nesta's cage up. She gazed curiously at Snape for a few moments.

"Sir, if your mother had Tal-y-Rhys blood, then doesn't that make you one as well? If inheritance passes down the mother's line."

"Most perceptive. However, I'm not the heir. And I always preferred ravens myself."

Deanna nodded and turned to go. Until something else occurred to her.

"Sir, did you actually get any compensation off Lucius Malfoy?"

"Forty Galleons. Ten for the owl's value, ten for the inconvenience, ten for each year you'd had him."

"But you didn't actually spend any of that on a new bird, did you?" Deanna grinned.

Snape allowed himself a smile. "No. I did not."

"So what did you do with it, then?"

"Well, I considered giving it to the organisers of the Glastonbury Festival if they'd relocate it to Malfoy Manor, but I didn't want their blood on my hands. So I gave it to your mother instead. I believe it's with the rest of your inheritance at Gringotts."

Deanna tilted her head to one side. "I think I preferred the Glastonbury idea myself. A photo of the Malfoys' faces would be worth more than any amount of gold."

"Very possibly, however the thought of their reaction once they'd got over the initial shock is rather less appealing. Go on, get back to your common room. And get that falcon back to the Owlery."

"Will do." Deanna grinned. "Oh, and sir."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"He said what?" Marlie squealed.

"He said he almost paid the organisers of Glastonbury forty Galleons to relocate to Malfoy Manor this year."

Luella burst out laughing. "Surely not? Cool idea though."

"I can't believe Professor Snape said that. It's most, well, unteacherly." said Rianne disapprovingly.

"I can't believe Deanna tried to take his Christmas present back." Marlie commented. "Deanna, why?"

"I don't know. I just felt... bad." Deanna shrugged. "It just didn't feel right accepting something that valuable off a teacher."

"I really don't get you sometimes." Marlie stared at Deanna in confusion. "DT, if someone gives you a gift that cool apparently out of the goodness of his heart, you bloody keep it!"

"That'd be it." Rianne nodded sagely. "She doesn't want to be indebted to Snape. Good reasoning."

"Well, it's OK now. Snape told me that she came to me of her own free will and stays with me of her own accord. So anyway, I let her go in the courtyard just now and told her that if she didn't want to be my pet, she could leave now, just go back to the wild. She took off, did a few circuits of the school then flew back to me. Wouldn't go until I told her all right, you can stay. Then flew off to the Owlery. Guess you could say she's really mine now. If you love something set it free and all that."

"I still wonder why he gave her to you." Rianne mused. "Why a falcon?"

Deanna shrugged. "Does it matter? It's my family's ancestral symbol, and apparently she came to Snape and told him she was meant for me. He was just passing her on. And as Marlie so rightly said, when someone gives you a present like that, you don't ask questions."

"Didn't occur to you that Snape might want something?" Luella asked.

"Like what?" Deanna asked carelessly. "Why would he want me in his debt? I've got nothing that he could possibly want. Stop being paranoid, you two. Nesta's lovely and I'm keeping her. End of story."

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Chapter Ten The Prank of the Century

The Hogwarts staff room was full of rather more whispers than usual, Snape thought as he entered it. Pouring himself a cup of herbal tea, he caught a hushed conversation between Professors McGonagall and Sprout.

"Such a shame about Mildred, isn't it?" Professor Sprout was saying.

"Indeed." Professor McGonagall said, concern colouring her voice. "Poppy says she won't be able to fly again for another three months. Which puts us in an awkward position with regards to the Quidditch Tournament."

Snape's ears pricked up at this. Mildred Hooch, unable to fly and thus unable to referee Quidditch matches?

"What about the Quidditch Tournament?" he asked innocently, trying to ignore the looks of suspicion Sprout and McGonagall were giving him.

"Mildred's injured herself tripping over her cat." Sprout told him. "She won't be able to fly until April, which means we now have no one to referee the next Quidditch matches. I mean, Minerva's volunteered for Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw, but we have no one for Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff."

"Too bad." Snape murmured softly. Something occurred to him. "Gryffindor, did you say?"

"That's right." McGonagall said stiffly.

"They'll be playing Potter as usual, I take it?"

"Severus, we don't have a reserve Seeker, as you well know. Of course he's playing. Your point being?"

"I'll do it." Snape said suddenly.

Sprout and McGonagall looked at each other in confusion. They turned back to Snape.

"Do what?" Sprout asked, bewildered.

"Referee the match. What?" he snarled at them. Sprout was trying not to laugh, while McGonagall was gazing at him sceptically.

"Since when have you ever been in to Quidditch?" Sprout asked in derision. "Do you even know the rules?"

"They're not that difficult!" he snapped. "I'm sure I could learn."

"Severus, I've seen you on a broom." McGonagall said firmly. "Poetry in motion it isn't. Why on earth you'd want to be involved, I have no idea, you only attend matches because you want Slytherin to win..." Her voice trailed off. Snape shifted uncomfortably as the look in her eyes changed to one of fury. "That's it, isn't it? You're afraid Slytherin might, horror of horrors, actually lose the Cup this year! Of all the sneaky, deceptive..."

"Not true, Minerva!" he snapped. "I've got my reasons. Anyway, you're refereeing the Slytherin match. Who's to say you won't take the opportunity to give Gryffindor a little help?"

He knew instantly he'd gone too far. McGonagall drew herself up to her full height and caught her breath, going very pale indeed. Snape suddenly found himself mentally regressing to the student in trouble he'd once been.

"How dare you!" she hissed at him. "Accuse me of cheating! I would never unfairly favour Gryffindor in any way. I'm refereeing that match because I'm one of the few other staff members with enough knowledge of Quidditch to do it. You don't have that justification." She gave him a piercing stare.

"Well, you'll have to believe I've got good reasons then, won't you?" Snape said harshly. "Because I'm going to Dumbledore now, to ask him. I will referee that match!" And with that, he swept out of the room.

Dumbledore seemed only a little surprised by Snape's request.

"I never thought you were a Quidditch fan, Severus." he said mildly.

"Well, I'm not." he said roughly. "But I want to do it."

"Might I ask why?"

Snape gazed intently at him. "You remember the last Gryffindor match?"

"I do."

"Potter could have been killed. I don't want that happening again."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Very humanitarian of you, Severus. You surprise me, I wasn't aware you even liked the boy."

"My own feelings have nothing to do with it. But I don't want him dead." Snape shivered with emotion. "I don't want him dead." he whispered.

"Are you alright, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, a little alarmed.

Snape nodded. "I'm fine." He recovered his composure. "So. This match. Can I?"

Dumbledore regarded him keenly. "You really want to do it, don't you?"

"Yes. I do." He met Dumbledore's gaze. "I've no great liking for Potter, but I owe it to his mother to keep her son alive. Lily would never forgive me if I allowed any harm to come to him."

"Lily's dead, Severus."

"I know." Snape said bitterly. "I know."

"You're doing what?!" Caitlin howled with laughter.

"Refereeing Gryffindor's next Quidditch match. Stop laughing, it's not funny!"

Caitlin wiped her eyes and attempted to compose herself. "Sorry. It's just that the thought of you on a broom..." She somehow managed to prevent herself laughing again, but only just.

Snape glared at her. "Stop it. Everyone reacts like that. What exactly is so amusing about the thought of me refereeing a match?"

"Just that you were never really into it at school or since." Caitlin said meekly. "And Flying never was your strong point, admit it. Um. Sevi, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Caitlin, last time Gryffindor played a match, Potter nearly died. I can't risk that happening again."

"I know, but isn't there another way of protecting him that doesn't involve making a fool of yourself on a broom?"

Snape gritted his teeth. "I am not going to make a fool of myself! Just because I've never played the game before, have yet to master the intricacies of the rules and haven't used a broom for anything other than flights into Hogsmeade and back for ten years doesn't mean I'm going to make a fool of myself in front of the whole school." He met Caitlin's eyes. He was strongly reminded of the way Sprout and McGonagall had looked at him earlier. And now he realised why they'd been looking at him like that. "Caitlin. Oh Caitlin. What have I done?" he asked, a growing feeling of horror dawning on him.

Caitlin grinned merrily. "Your own fault, Severus. You will volunteer for these things. When's the match?"

"End of March. Six weeks away. Oh gods." Snape held his head in his hands. He looked wildly at Caitlin. "Help me."

"I can't referee the match for you, Severus." she chided gently.

"Please?" he asked hopefully. "You were really good at Quidditch at school. You're a brilliant flier. Go on, you'd be good."

"Severus, this is your problem." Caitlin said sternly. "You volunteered for this, and you're going to do it."

"How??"

"You've got six weeks to find out. I'll lend you my copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* if you like."

"It'll take more than that to turn me into a Quidditch referee." Snape moaned.

"Well, obviously. But I'm sure we can give it our best shot."

"We?"

"Of course." Caitlin smiled. "You don't really think I'm going to let one of my best friends humiliate himself in front of the entire school? By the time I'm finished with you, Madam Hooch will be in fear of her job."

Snape clutched Caitlin's hand in a pathetic display of gratitude. "Thank you. Thank you so much. Caitlin, I swear to every god there is, I will be in your eternal debt if you can just turn me into a Quidditch expert and halfway decent flier in six weeks. I will never, ever, have the temerity to ask you for anything again. Ever."

"Until you need your next favour doing." Caitlin said sarcastically. "Alright. Where's a good place to practice? Where we won't be seen."

"There's a valley the other side of Hogwarts. You'll be able to Apparate in, and there's very little chance of any students seeing us."

"Well, I can put up some Unremarkable Charms and a glamour or two just in case. Then there's your theory training. Your place or mine?"

"Yours is probably more secure, but on the other hand, mine is more conducive to study. Let's alternate."

"Done. When shall we start?"

"Tonight?"

Marlie returned from Quidditch practice in a better mood than she'd been in for ages. Deanna and Rianne gave each other knowing looks and settled themselves expectantly. Luella also noted Marlie's grin, which contained more than a hint of sadism, and the way in which she was bouncing around, desperate to share the news with them.

"Alright, Marlie. Out with it. What's happened to light your fuse then?" Luella sighed. "You're clearly dying to tell us."

"Nothing much." Marlie grinned smugly. "Just that the Quidditch Cup's ours again this year."

All three sat up at this.

"Yeah?" Deanna asked, intrigued. "What's happened? Has Harry resigned from the Gryffindor team?"

"No, not as far as I know." Marlie grinned. "Although he might do when he hears this. You know Madam Hooch won't be refereeing the next round of matches due to injury?"

"Yes." they answered guardedly. Marlie's grin grew even bigger.

"Well, Flint just told us who's standing in."

"And that would be...?" Rianne asked, getting tired of waiting.

"All in good time. Our match against Ravenclaw is to be refereed by McGonagall."

"McGonagall?" snapped Deanna. "She's head of Gryffindor, that's hardly fair!"

"Oh be sensible, Tyler. She's one of the few teachers who knows anything about Quidditch. And since when has McGonagall been anything but scrupulously fair?" Rianne said irritably. "Who's doing the other match?"

"That, my dear Rianne, is the good news. None other than our very own Professor Snape." Marlie smiled gleefully.

"Snape?!" they all cried as one.

"Since when has Snape refereed a Quidditch match?" demanded Deanna. "He doesn't even like the game, does he?"

Rianne shook her head. "Not interested, never has been. Any idea why, Marls?"

Marlie shrugged. "No one knows. It's a puzzle. Maybe he was annoyed that McGonagall is refereeing our match. But who cares? Gryffindor'll never win with him refereeing. The Cup's ours! Isn't that great?"

"Brilliant!" Deanna grinned. "We're going to be Champions again!" Marlie and Deanna shared a spontaneous hug. Rianne sighed.

"Well, I hope he knows what he's doing. We don't want him injuring himself as well."

"Ah, Rianne, he'll be fine. I'm sure he wouldn't have volunteered if he didn't think he could do it." Deanna said dismissively. "Quit worrying."

Luella however shared Rianne's fears. Snape had previously had no interest whatsoever in Quidditch. So why was he now volunteering to referee a game? It didn't make sense. Unless of course, you knew about the Philosopher's Stone. Was that involved somehow? She just hoped he knew what he was doing.

"Anyway." Marlie got up. "I have to go to the library. Need to do my Transfiguration homework. See you guys."

Marlie had not gone far when she heard footsteps behind her. She spun round, one hand curling around her wand.

"Don't fret, Lovegood." Draco sneered. "I'm not stalking you. I'm on the same errand as you are."

"You're actually going to the library?" Marlie asked in disbelief. "That I doubt. You spend less time on your homework than I do, and that's saying something."

Draco shrugged. "Defence Against the Dark Arts homework due in. Not that it's exactly interesting. Now if I'd gone to a proper school like Durmstrang, we'd be doing the real thing. Interesting things."

"Nothing stopping you transferring." Marlie said sourly as her cousin caught up with her and began walking alongside.

"My mother wanted me at a school closer to home, so Hogwarts it was. Why, thinking of getting me expelled too?"

Marlie spun to face him, fury blazing in her eyes. She bit her tongue and calmed herself down. After all, he really wasn't worth getting into a fight over.

"Don't slip poison to me or any of my friends, and you won't have to worry, will you?" she said brusquely.

"What makes you think it'd be poison this time?" Draco said softly. "Never send a Crabbe to do a Malfoy's job."

Marlie really would have hit him this time, but she was distracted by voices coming from around the corner, one of which they recognised as Professor Snape's.

"Did I mention how grateful I am for this, Caitlin?"

"Many, many times, but I'm not averse to hearing it again." a woman responded, amused. Draco gave Marlie a quizzical look. Marlie, however, recognised the woman instantly and began to grin.

Professor Snape and Mrs. Tyler stepped around the corner and halted immediately on seeing the two children. Mrs. Tyler gave Marlie a warm smile of recognition. Snape, however, was somewhere between fury and horror.

"What are you two doing out of your common room?" he snarled.

"Going to the library, sir." Draco said innocently. "Why, what else would we be doing?"

Snape glared at him as if to say he could guess only too clearly what else they might be doing.

Marlie swiftly changed the subject. "Hello, Mrs. Tyler." she said cheerfully. "What are you doing here? Nothing wrong with Deanna, I hope."

"No, Deanna's fine." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Actually, it's really a social call. Severus is merely calling on my Quidditch expertise, seeing as he'll be refereeing Gryffindor's next match."

Draco was now looking at Marlie even more curiously and beginning to grin. Marlie avoided his eyes, not wanting to burst out laughing.

"OK, then." Marlie said calmly. "We'll leave you to it. Come on, Malfoy." She dragged Draco away and out of sight.

They both waited until there was little chance of Snape overhearing them before they finally met each other's eyes. Both dissolved into helpless laughter.

"Calling on her Quidditch expertise, eh?" Draco sniggered. "Is that the oldest chat-up line in the book or what?"

"Stop it." Marlie said, giggling. "I'm sure he's not really having an affair with her. Deanna'd hit the roof."

Draco laughed even harder at this. "Tyler's mother! And Snape! Aphrodite, yes! Could it get any better? I must say, Lovegood," he added, recovering himself, "you never told me Tyler's mum was such a babe. I can quite see why Snape's taken a shine to her. Quite fancy her myself."

"She wouldn't be interested in you, Malfoy." Marlie said lazily. "Quite apart from the fact you're only eleven, she seems to prefer Snape anyway. Oh, sorry, Severus." She went off into another fit of laughter.

"Very informal." Draco grinned. "Oh, just wait until Tyler hears this." He turned to go back to the common room.

"Wait!" Marlie grabbed his arm. "You can't run in there and tell her, just like that."

"Why not?" demanded Draco.

"Because, my dear cousin," Marlie grinned, "these things require *planning*."

Deanna glanced up irritably as a grinning Draco strode over to her, an apparently furious Marlie behind him.

"One word, Malfoy, one word!" she shouted. Draco ignored her and sat down next to Deanna.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna said wearily. "I'm not in the mood for one of your games."

"No game of mine." Draco grinned. "Only one playing games is your mother, who I've just had the pleasure of meeting. You didn't tell me she was such a stunner."

Deanna glared at him. "If you've just come to make insulting remarks about my mother, Malfoy... Anyway, where did you meet her?"

"Why, right here, of course!" Draco said, wide-eyed. "Just on her way back from a date with our dear House Master."

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Marlie yelled. Draco took no notice, just grinning even wider.

Deanna went pale. "She is not seeing Professor Snape!" she shouted at him, drawing more than a few looks from her fellow Slytherins.

"Oh, but she is..." Draco purred. "Quite cosy, they were too. He was just taking her into his office for a few tips on Quidditch refereeing. They're probably there now, discussing flying technique and giving his broomstick a good polishing."

"WHAT??" shrieked Deanna. Marlie hung her head. Deanna turned to her in outrage.

"He *is* lying, I take it. Isn't he? Marlie, please. I beg you." Deanna stared at her in desperation. Marlie could only look back at her miserably.

"I'm sorry, Deanna. I tried to stop him. But he wouldn't listen."

"AAAAGGGHHH!!!" Deanna screamed. Snatching up her wand, she raced out into the corridor, the door slamming behind her, her housemates staring after her in stunned surprise. Marlie and Draco watched her go, grins beginning to spread over their faces. As one, they slowly turned to look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Did you see the look on her face?" Draco howled.

Marlie nodded weakly, wiping tears from her eyes. "She's going to kill us. Oh, but it was so worth it! Damn, we're good."

"Absolutely." Draco sighed. "Good acting, by the way. I was worried you were going to burst out laughing at a crucial moment and ruin it, but no, you were very convincing."

"Of course." Marlie tossed her hair back in the manner beloved of beautiful women everywhere. "Am I not a Slytherin? I have to say, though, you weren't bad yourself. That broomstick remark...! Does your mother know you have such a filthy mind?"

Rianne was regarding them both in astonishment. "You two planned this entire thing?"

Draco and Marlie nodded. Rianne shook her head in disbelief.

"I do not believe you two. How could you do that to her, she'll be so humiliated!"

"That's the general idea." grinned Draco.

"Ah, come on Ri, it'll be fun!" laughed Marlie.

"Not when Tyler gets back breathing fire and cursing you and all your families. I don't suppose her mother really is up here, is she?" Rianne asked scathingly.

"Actually, yes." said Marlie. Luella pricked up her ears.

"Is she? So you mean she really is giving Professor Snape a few pointers on Quidditch then?" she asked in surprise.

Draco snickered. "That's her story, anyway. Who knows what carnal delights they are even now engaging in..."

"Malfoy!" snapped Rianne. "Shut up! I am sure Professor Snape is not having an affair with her! Back me up here, Lu."

Luella had been watching all this in quiet admiration for Marlie and Draco's daring, suffering only slight twinges of disloyalty.

"No, of course not. I'm sure she wouldn't." she said hastily. "Although..." While she had no wish to see Deanna humiliated, the entire situation couldn't help but strike her as amusing. "I do hope Deanna doesn't walk in on anything she shouldn't."

Marlie gave a sly grin. "Well, when she gets back, we'll find out."

Snape ushered Caitlin into his office, less than pleased.

"I thought you said you'd put a glamour over us both!" he hissed at her.

"Must have slipped my mind." she said innocently.

"Slipped your mind indeed... Now the entire Slytherin common room is going to be buzzing with rumours and speculation, and my job is going to be impossible! Of all the students to see us, it had to be Malfoy and Miss Lovegood. And you had to tell them, didn't you? Couldn't bluff your way out of it, could you?"

Caitlin was unmoved. "Severus, no matter what I said, they were going to talk. Would you have had me lie to them?"

"I'm amazed you even had to ask that. You, who once suggested putting a Memory Charm on Mr. Malfoy."

"I bet you're regretting not letting me do it now, aren't you?" Caitlin grinned. "Ah, you'll survive. Just tough it out and come down hard on any student who says anything. Now." She produced a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* which she'd picked up from the library. "I don't know how much you know, so I'll just give a basic overview of the rules before starting with Chasers. Pull up a seat, my friend. We could be here a while."

However, they had not been at work long before they were interrupted. The door burst open, and Deanna stormed in.

"GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF..." She stopped and took in the scene in front of her. Caitlin was sitting back in one of the chairs with her feet on the desk, *Quidditch Through the Ages* on her lap. Snape was sat at his desk, quill in hand, in the middle of taking notes. Both were looking at her in surprise.

It dawned on Deanna that she'd been had. "Oh my." she said quietly. "You two really *are* learning the rules of Quidditch."

"Well, of course we are, dear." Caitlin said, with a slightly puzzled air. "What did you think we were doing?" A slow smile began to creep across her face as Deanna's expression said all too clearly what she thought they'd been doing. Snape had the grace to avert his eyes, although that could have been more to avoid laughing than anything else.

Deanna swiftly mustered what remaining shreds of dignity she had left. "Well, er, in that case, I'll, um, leave you to it. I'm just off to murder Malfoy, see you both soon." With that, she was gone.

Caitlin and Snape watched her go in silence. Finally, he raised his eyes to look at her. The moment he did so, they both dissolved into laughter.

"Oh my! You two really are learning the rules of Quidditch!" Caitlin laughed, doing an all too accurate impression of her daughter.

Snape dried his eyes. "Whose idea do you think that was, Mr. Malfoy's or Miss Lovegood's?"

"Wouldn't like to say, Sevi. I think it was one of those things that simultaneously occurred to both, and had such potential that they had no option other than to suspend their differences and run with it."

"Those are always the best, aren't they?" Snape grinned. He gazed into the distance. "I wonder if I should go into the Nest, make sure everything's alright. Stop the bloodshed getting out of hand."

"Better not." Caitlin cautioned. "The mood most of them will be in right now, it could prove embarrassing. Anyway, I think Deanna's suffered enough. Probably best if you respect her dignity and act like it never happened. Draco and Marlie are quite capable of looking after themselves."

"I suppose so. Anyway, it will give our devious offspring the opportunity to devise revenge on them both. It'll be interesting to see what she comes up with. Now, you were saying about tackles from behind?"

Deanna burst in to the Slytherin common room in fury, wand raised. By this time, Marlie and Draco had filled everyone else in on what had happened, and the whole of Slytherin House was watching expectantly.

"You're dead meat, Malfoy!" she screamed at him, red with rage. Draco seemed unbothered. Marlie tried unsuccessfully not to laugh.

"Do you know what they were doing in there?" she snarled at him. "Do you?"

"Position 47 of the Kama Sutra?" Draco inquired. Next to him, Marlie began sniggering helplessly.

"She was describing the ways in which it's possible for Chasers to commit fouls on each other!" Deanna yelled. All over the room, Slytherins were turning away and snickering. "They really were learning about Quidditch! I've made a complete fool of myself." She noticed Marlie sniggering. "Were you in on this?!"

"Um." Marlie said, unsure what to say. "Sorry. Er... maybe we misinterpreted the situation?"

"Misinterpreted, my arse. I can't believe you two did this to me. Well, OK, I can believe Malfoy would. But you... You're meant to be my friend!"

"Sorry, Deanna." Marlie mumbled. "But you've got to admit, it was pretty funny."

"It was not funny! It was embarrassing. I've got to have a Potions class with him tomorrow, how on earth am I meant to look him in the eye? Not to mention having to

face Mum when school finishes." She sank into a chair and glared fiercely at Luella who was trying to conceal her giggles. "And you can stop laughing and all."

"Sorry." Luella said weakly. "At least there won't be any rumours now about Snape and your mum."

"No, they'll all be far too busy talking about me!" Deanna snapped. "Thanks a bundle, Marlie. And you, Malfoy!" she called at Draco, who had rejoined Crabbe and Goyle.

"Any time, Tyler." he drawled languidly.

"I'm so sorry about them, Deanna." Rianne said, giving Draco and Marlie stern looks of disapproval. "I did try and tell them off, but they absolutely refused to take me seriously."

"No surprises there." Deanna said acidly. "I cannot believe you sometimes, Marlie. Teaming up with Malfoy, of all people! How could you?"

"Sorry, DT. But he was there at the time and it just seemed too good an opportunity to miss. I know he's Draco Malfoy and all, but he was the perfect accomplice. I promise not to team up with him on a regular basis, if it helps."

"Good thing too, if this is the outcome." Luella remarked. "You two working together? Doesn't bear thinking about. It'd be like having the Weasley twins in our house."

"Hey, now that's not a bad idea!" Marlie grinned.

"Lu, don't encourage her, for Hera's sake!" Rianne said, appalled.

"Yes, the thought of Slytherin's two most twisted minds working together is not something I really want to imagine." Deanna said, still somewhat bitter. She got out her homework. "Right. I am going to do my Potions homework. And we are not going to discuss this ever again. End of story. OK, what are the principal ingredients of a Forgetfulness potion?"

As Luella and Rianne starting fighting over the chance to show off their knowledge, Marlie glanced over at her cousin. He noticed her looking at him and winked mischievously. Marlie grinned back. And from that moment on, while Draco and Marlie did not exactly become best friends, they each harboured a certain respect for the other. To quote another top writer, there's certain things that you can't do together without starting to like the other person. And executing the Prank of the Century is one of them.

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Chapter Eleven A Reprieve For Slytherin

Six weeks ticked by. The Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw match came and went. Marlie, determined to prove she was still as good a Seeker as she'd always been, deliberately held off going for the Snitch, letting her team mates rack up the points for Slytherin first. After the match had gone on for nearly two hours, with Slytherin leading Ravenclaw 150 - 80, she finally put them out of their misery with a stunning capture at the Slytherin end, dodging past Laetitia, Jordan, two Ravenclaw Chasers and Professor McGonagall to pluck the Snitch effortlessly out of the sky.

At the post-match party, Deanna and Luella were congratulating her.

"Well done, Marlie!" Deanna patted her on the back proudly. "See? Told you you could do it."

"Yeah, we'll be back to our winning ways in no time!" Luella added. "The Cup is ours!"

Marlie was not convinced. "Yeah? Gryffindor are the main rivals and we didn't beat them. All they've got to do is beat Hufflepuff, which let's face it, isn't hard, and they're in front. We could still lose!" Marlie looked thoroughly depressed.

"Not with Snape refereeing their next match." Rianne pointed out. "They'll have to do pretty well there to get a victory. Come on, Lovegood. You played the best Quidditch of your life, we won by miles and you're still depressed? What will make you happy?"

"Not being kicked off the team next season." Marlie said miserably. "If we lose the Cup...!"

"Stop being so defeatist." said Deanna firmly. "We're not going to lose the Cup. We can't lose the Cup. We're Slytherin House, the mighty Verts-et-Argents. We won't lose. We can't."

Finally, the crucial day arrived. Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. The four girls found themselves seats near the back, which Deanna claimed actually offered the best views. Luella thought she had a point, but was it strictly necessary to be so high up? She kept her eyes focused on the sky.

Marlie was gazing fixedly at the teams as they filed in. Rianne, sitting next to her, commented "Must be a change watching the action from here instead of up there, mustn't it?"

"I would so rather be flying." Marlie whispered. "My whole Quidditch future's riding on this and there's nothing I can do! I feel so helpless."

"Well, don't go helping the other side and you won't have to worry, will you?" said a voice from the row in front. All four of them turned to look. It was Draco, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Shut up, Malfoy." Deanna said irritably, returning her gaze to the players who were now filing onto the pitch.

Draco shrugged. "Just offering some friendly advice." He turned back to watching the match get underway. "I wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want to bet? What about you, Weasley?" This was directed at Ron in the row in front. Ron didn't answer. Like the rest of the crowd, he was watching Hufflepuff take a penalty which Snape had given them after George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him.

"It's starting." Deanna grinned. "Anyone want to bet on how many penalties he's going to award Hufflepuff by the time he's through?"

Luella slapped her forehead. "Ah, no, what a business opportunity missed! We could have made a fortune on that. Maybe next time. You up for it, Marls?"

Marlie didn't reply. Her attention was focused on a penalty Snape had awarded Hufflepuff for no reason she could identify. Hufflepuff put it away in no time, and Marlie sagged in relief.

Luella's attention was caught by Draco sneering "Longbottom, if brains were gold, you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Then Ron's voice replying menacingly "I'm warning you, Malfoy, one more word..."

And a sudden shriek from Hermione. "Harry!"

Marlie howled and buried her face in her hands. Harry had gone into a dive, and Marlie's Seeker instincts had told her immediately what that meant. He'd seen the Snitch.

"No, lose sight of it!" Marlie moaned.

"What's he doing, is he trying to knock Snape out or what?" Rianne demanded. "He'll lose points for sure if he does that."

"You're in luck Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground." Draco remarked. Ron lost it and pounced on Draco, wrestling him to the ground. Next to him, Neville Longbottom hesitated, before leaping in to give him a hand.

Luella and Deanna turned away from the game to watch the fight instead.

"Exactly what does Longbottom think he's doing?" Deanna asked casually.

Luella watched the blur that was Neville, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Trying to get himself killed, I imagine."

"Well, I'll say this for him, he's brave. Stupid, but brave. Still, at least it proves he's a real Gryffindor. I did have my doubts."

"Do you reckon we should help him out?" Luella asked, concerned. "I mean, he could get hurt."

Deanna drew her wand out. "Go on then. You ready?" Luella drew her own wand with a nod and the two of them leapt over the seats.

Marlie howled in pain and desperation. Next to her Rianne buried her head on Marlie's shoulder.

"Nooo!" moaned Marlie. "He can't have caught it already!" But he had. Harry was even now coming in to land, arm raised in triumph.

Rianne looked up at her friend. "How?" she whispered. "The game's only five minutes old if that! Not even you've caught the Snitch in five minutes before!"

Marlie shook her head numbly. "Current Hogwarts record, twenty minutes, set by me in our first year against Gryffindor, funnily enough. Ha. Gods, Rianne, they won. They won. We've had it, Ri."

Rianne held her. "Hey. Cheer up. We can still do it if Ravenclaw beat them. And assuming we beat the Huffs, which we will! Not all over yet."

"It might as well be!" Marlie wept. "Ravenclaw are good, but Gryffindor are better! We've lost, Ri, they're going to kick me off the team next season, my Quidditch career is over, and it's all my fault!"

"What's all your fault?" Deanna gasped as she clambered back into her seat, clutching her stomach. Luella followed, rubbing her jaw.

Rianne and Marlie looked at them in amazement. Deanna had what looked like the beginnings of a black eye while Luella had a rather nasty cut on her left cheek and some tears in her robes.

"What happened to you two?" Rianne asked.

"Got in a fight." Deanna explained. "Crabbe and Goyle were picking on Neville Longbottom so we thought we'd break it up. Longbottom's still out cold, we're going to take him up to the hospital wing now. Crabbe and Goyle are already on their way there."

"Crabbe's sporting a plague of moles on his back." Luella grinned. "Real ones. While Goyle... what did you do to Goyle, Dee?"

"Turned him into a gorilla. Well, his head anyway. Not that you can really tell the difference, but still."

Rianne looked impressed. "Ooh, well done. Honestly, those two. Always picking on someone. Poor old Neville, is he alright?"

Marlie, for once, did not look happy with them. "Never mind him, what about you? You'll get in trouble, you'll lose us points, we can't afford to lose the House Cup too!"

"Oh, Marlie, relax. There's more important things in life. What would Morticia think of you?" said Deanna gently. "Come on you lot, let's get Neville to the hospital wing."

Life in the Slytherin common room proceeded more or less as normal after that, although far more subdued. Snape was in a fouler mood than usual, and even Deanna and Luella were keeping quiet around him. The Quidditch team were hardly speaking to Marlie, and Marcus Flint was a man to be avoided. Besides which, the work was now being piled on, exams were only a couple of months away, and the time for partying had ended. Only Draco seemed unaffected, remaining his usual wisecracking self.

"Look at him!" Deanna hissed. "Does he ever do any work?"

Rianne raised her eyebrows in stunned amazement. "Coming from you, I'd say that's almost hypocritical."

"He's a firstie, Dee." said Luella. "Wait until he's our age, then he'll change. You weren't really very assiduous with the old homework when you were a first year, were you?"

"What do you mean, when she was a first year?" snapped Marlie. "She still isn't! Quirrell and Flitwick are the only ones who ever get any effort out of her. Gods know how."

"Just because I'm focusing on the subjects most likely to benefit me when I'm an Auror." said Deanna lazily. "What are you up to, Marls?"

Marlie had her head buried in a weighty tome on Transfiguration. "Doing some Transfiguration research."

Luella glanced at the book's title. "*Advanced Transfiguration* by Annie Major. Marlie, you can't possibly need to know all that!" Marlie shuffled uncomfortably. "You never know." she said mysteriously. "I might."

"All very well and good, but I think Professor McGonagall might be rather more pleased if you did the work she's actually set you." Rianne said disapprovingly.

"Done that."

"OK, what about your other subjects? Astronomy, Herbology, Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, History of Magic, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, surely you've work to do in all of them?"

Marlie put down the book with a sigh. "Alright, alright, point taken." She started working on her History of Magic essay. However, she continued to glance at Draco. He was looking disturbingly pleased with himself. What was he up to now?

The following day, Marlie cornered him. "Alright, Malfoy, out with it. You've been wandering around grinning like your worst enemy's just lost a winning lottery ticket. What are you planning now?"

"Nothing!" Draco said innocently. Marlie was not fooled.

"Don't even bother lying to me, Malfoy. I'm mates with the Weasley twins, I can spot lies a mile off. What are you really up to?"

Draco looked around to check that no one was looking. Pulling Marlie aside, he lowered his voice.

"Alright, I'll let you in on it, but don't tell anyone! I've discovered a way to get Potter in a whole heap of trouble and maybe just win the Cup for Slytherin."

Marlie was intrigued. Something that could salvage the Cup for Slytherin? Now this was interesting.

"Tell me more." she purred.

"Dragons." he grinned.

"Dragons?! Malfoy, that's illegal, very illegal! I hope you've not brought one to school. They're dangerous!" said Marlie sternly.

"Not me." Draco grinned even wider. "Hagrid."

"Hagrid!"

"Keep your voice down! Yes, Hagrid. He's got this Norwegian Ridgeback kept in his hut. Hatched last week."

"A Norwegian Ridgeback - Malfoy, those things are vicious. Do you have any idea how big they grow up to be? The Rutland Ridgebacks have a life-size one outside their ground, it's huge! Bigger than my house! There's no way Hagrid can have one of those, it'll wreck his house, and I don't just mean knock a few pieces of furniture over!"

Draco grinned. "I know. That's why he's getting rid of it on Saturday. Some friends of Weasley's brother are coming to pick it up at midnight on the Astronomy tower. And guess who's going to be out of bed after curfew to meet them?"

"Who's that?" Marlie asked curiously.

"Potter and Granger. Weasley was going too, but he's in the hospital wing with a dragon bite. Isn't this wonderful?" Draco was practically dancing with delight.

Marlie bit her lip. This didn't sound good. On the one hand, she wasn't at all averse to seeing Gryffindor lose points. But on the other, she did like young Harry, and certainly didn't want to see him expelled.

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Marlie asked. "Go to Snape or something? Hera knows he'd like to see Potter out."

"Oh no." Draco grinned. "This works much better as blackmail material. I'm going to meet up with them, confront them and threaten to tell Snape if Potter doesn't agree to throw the Ravenclaw match."

"Malfoy!" Marlie gasped in shock. "That's terrible! That's unethical! That's... that's... Do you reckon it'll work?"

"I think so." said Draco confidently. "Look at it this way, if he doesn't agree, I go to Snape and Gryffindor lose lots of points and quite possibly their star Seeker. If he does, Gryffindor still won't win the Championship. It's a win-win situation."

"Malfoy, that's amazing." said Marlie in awe. "Morally bankrupt, of course, but amazing nonetheless. Well, good luck. I'll keep it quiet. But if it goes wrong, of course, then I know nothing about any of it."

"I would expect nothing less. Well, goodbye Lovegood. Maybe your place on the team is safe after all." Draco grinned evilly and slipped off, leaving Marlie alone. Hoisting her bag up, she turned to go to her next lesson.

Luella stepped quietly out of the shadows and watched Marlie go. While still unsure how she managed to do it, being able to hide herself like this did have its advantages. Well, well, so that was why Malfoy had been so cheerful lately. It was a brilliant plan, Luella had to admit. However, there was also no getting away from the fact that blackmail was illegal. Not to mention cheating. No way, she thought. No way is he getting away with it. Harry and Hermione are my friends, I'm not letting them get in trouble. She checked her timetable. Transfiguration next. The ghost of a plan beginning to form, Luella hurried off.

The lesson could not pass quickly enough. As the rest of the class filed out, Luella told Deanna not to bother waiting, she just wanted to ask McGonagall for help with something, and went up to her desk.

Professor McGonagall looked up. "Yes, Miss Martin?"

"Um, Professor, I'm not sure if I ought to tell you this, but..."

Professor McGonagall looked concerned. "Tell me what?" Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What have Miss Tyler and Miss Lovegood been up to now?"

"Nothing. It's not them, it's Malfoy."

"Malfoy? What is he up to? And shouldn't you be going to Professor Snape with this, you are both in his house after all." McGonagall looked at her curiously.

Luella wrung her hands. "I know but if I go to Snape, Malfoy might suspect it was me who told on him."

McGonagall sighed wearily. The machinations of a Slytherin's mind were clearly something she was used to by now. "Alright. What is he planning?"

"He's planning to sneak out of bounds Saturday night. I think he's heading for the Astronomy Tower, about half eleven or so. I heard him talking to his friends about it, some kind of dare apparently. I just thought you should know."

"Is he now." McGonagall said firmly, her mouth stiffening into a thin line. "Well, thank you for letting me know, Miss Martin. I shall see if I can intercept him. You did the right thing in telling me."

"Thank you, Professor." Luella murmured softly. As she turned to go, a sly smile crept over her face. Phase One had worked perfectly.

Phase Two, however, was rather more dangerous. Saturday night came around to find Luella wrapped in her black school cloak and wearing her slippers, standing by the common room door waiting for Draco.

Sure enough, at half past eleven, he tiptoed quietly into the room. And sure enough, he paid no attention to Luella whatsoever, but just walked past her. Luella followed him out, picturing a white mist around her, shielding her from view. He was making for the Astronomy Tower, that was certain, Luella thought to herself. Let's hope I can pull this off.

Her plan was this. Follow Malfoy and watch as he walked straight into McGonagall and a certain detention. Then wait at the Astronomy Tower for Harry and Hermione and warn them that McGonagall was around. They'd get rid of the dragon together, then she'd extend the invisibility shield around them and get them back to the Gryffindor common room before sneaking home.

Risky. Very risky. Not for her, she was pretty certain the shield would hold. But she hoped and prayed that Harry and Hermione didn't walk into McGonagall or anyone else while they still had the dragon. Because if they did, they'd get more than a detention.

Draco finally came to a halt at the foot of the Astronomy Tower. Huddled in the darkness he waited, a grin on his face. Luella held her breath. Sure enough, moments later, he gave a yell and started struggling frantically. Wandlight flared and there was Professor McGonagall clutching his arm furiously.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you!"

"You don't understand, Professor," Draco bleated, "Harry Potter's coming - he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on - I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!" With that, she dragged the protesting boy off. Luella grinned. OK, so they'd lost twenty points, but it could have been worse. And McGonagall didn't seem to be aware of Harry or Hermione being out, which was good news. All that remained now was to wait for them to turn up, follow them up to the top of the tower, explain what was going on and escort them back after they'd got rid of the dragon. Easy. She sat down and waited. And waited. Ten minutes slipped by, then twenty. Still no sign of them. Luella checked her watch. It was now half past midnight, and she'd been here since quarter to. Where were they? Was this some elaborate prank on Malfoy? Had they made up the whole story about the dragon just to lure him out of bed and get him in trouble? Very possibly. Feeling highly annoyed, Luella got up to leave.

A noise from behind her made her turn around. Her heart leapt into her mouth. *Filch*. Fortunately, he hadn't noticed her. Instead, he was hiding in the shadows, watching the entrance to the tower carefully. Luella felt her heart sink as she suddenly heard footsteps descending the tower staircase. Wait a second. Someone on their way *out* of the tower? But she'd been here since before midnight, how could they possibly have slipped past her? Had she fallen asleep or something?

Harry and Hermione stepped out into the corridor, grinning happily and giggling together. Luella felt sick inside. Filch noticed them instantly and stepped forward, gloating.

"Well, well, well." he whispered. "We *are* in trouble."

Luella held her head in her hands. The one thing she hadn't wanted to happen. The thought of throwing down the shield and hypnotising Filch into forgetting he'd ever seen them passed fleetingly through her mind, but she just couldn't take the risk. Using her powers to hide from teachers was one thing but actually trying to hypnotise them was something else. She could only watch helplessly as Filch dragged them both gleefully away.

Luella crept back to her common room with a heavy heart. What had gone wrong? Had Harry and Hermione suspected that Draco knew and gone up early? Or did one of them have the same powers she did? She truly didn't know. Cursing her foolishness in not waiting for them actually in the tower as soon as Draco and McGonagall had gone, she slipped back inside the deserted common room, dropped the invisibility shield and returned to her dorm.

Slipping quietly inside, she gently pushed the door shut and tiptoed across the room to her bed. She'd almost made it when a cold voice behind her said "*Pyrus Ignito!*" and the fire flared up.

Luella turned slowly. Rianne, Deanna and Marlie were sitting by the fire gazing at her. They did not look happy.

"And just where," Deanna said icily in tones that reminded Luella of Professor Snape, "do you think you've been?"

"So let's get this straight." Rianne was saying. "Malfoy thought Harry and Hermione had this illegal dragon and were taking it to the Astronomy Tower to give it to some of Charlie Weasley's friends."

"Actually, that bit's true." Marlie pointed out. "He told me himself."

"OK. So you told McGonagall that he was going out-of-bounds so he'd get caught. You then managed to sneak out after him without him or McGonagall seeing you, no mean feat in itself." Rianne said sarcastically. "After watching him get caught, you waited for Harry and Hermione to turn up so you could warn them and see them back safely after they'd got rid of the dragon. Only you missed them and they got caught by Filch, but not until after they'd met up with these dragon experts."

Luella nodded dumbly. Rianne stared at her incomprehensibly. "Luella, I have only two words for you. How, and more importantly, why?"

Luella shifted uncomfortably. "They're my friends. I didn't want them to get in trouble. Plus I don't like the idea of blackmail. Thought it was a good plan, me."

"Good plan??" Marlie snapped, shaking her platinum tresses. "We almost had the Gryffindors over a barrel! Not now we don't. They'll beat us for sure. Especially now that your meddling has lost us twenty points. Cheers, Lu."

"Oh Marlie, be quiet." Deanna snapped. "She's right, blackmail is pretty low. Anyway, Harry and Hermione got caught, so they're likely to lose loads of points too, so that'll even things up. We might even get our lead back. What I am more interested in is the how of things. How Luella managed to sneak up to the Astronomy Tower and back, with Draco 'Supergrass' Malfoy, Professor McGonagall, officially the sharpest knife in the drawer, and Filch who's had more practice than anyone in catching out-of-bounds students all within spitting distance of her, and not get caught when The Boy Who Lived, the smartest witch in the first year and Malfoy himself all did." Deanna folded her arms and gave Luella a meaningful look. "I think some kind of explanation is called for here, don't you?"

Luella stared helplessly at the three of them. They were all giving her extremely penetrating looks.

"Well?" Rianne asked softly. "We're waiting."

Luella sighed. She might as well tell them. "Alright, alright. I can make myself invisible."

"What? How?"

"That's impossible!"

"How long have you been able to do that?" Deanna demanded.

"I don't know." Luella said quietly. "I don't think it's magic, not in the normal sense. I mean, I don't need a wand or anything. I just imagine a wall of mist cloaking me and it's done, no one notices me, even if I'm right in front of them. I used it tonight, so no one saw me, and I was going to use it to get Harry and Hermione back to their common room. It can conceal other people too, if they're with me. I used it that night we investigated the forbidden corridor with Fred and George, that's why Filch couldn't see us."

Marlie looked impressed. "Wow! That's so cool. Hey, watch out Hogwarts! This school is ours."

Deanna grinned. "Oh, you said it. The Weasley twins are going to have nothing on us."

Rianne, however, was giving Marlie and Deanna bone-chillingly cold looks. "What night you investigated the forbidden corridor with Fred and George?"

Luella could only grin as Deanna and Marlie felt their moral high ground sliding away in a mudslide of Atlantean proportions. Rianne knew nothing about that particular adventure.

"Oh of course, you weren't with us, were you? Well, Fred and George invited these two out to investigate it back in December. Except I caught them sneaking out and so they had to invite me along or I'd have told on them. Filch nearly caught us, and we'd have been in a whole heap of trouble if I hadn't willed him not to see us. Which he didn't." Luella was enjoying herself enormously.

Deanna and Marlie wilted under Rianne's steady gaze. When Rianne spoke, it was in almost Snapien tones.

"So not only did you sneak out after curfew, you went to the most out-of-bounds place in the school! I don't believe you two sometimes! If you'd been caught...! It's a very good thing Luella caught you. Do you realise how many points you could have lost us?" She threw up her hands in despair, before fixing all three of them with a keen look. "Alright. In the past now. But I want a promise from you three that you will not go outside after hours again! With the current points situation, we just can't risk it! Promise me!"

"Promise, Ri." Deanna and Marlie muttered.

"Don't worry, I've got no plans to do it again." said Luella.

"Good." Rianne got up. "Now, I suggest we all go to bed. See you three in the morning. Goodnight." And with that, she turned in.

The next morning, all Luella wanted to do was get some breakfast down her. Deanna, however, had other plans.

"No, come on, you three, I want to check the points tally. See what damage last night's little escapade's done."

They duly filed after her to check. Luella was curious to see how many points Harry and Hermione had managed to lose. Never in her wildest dreams though could she have guessed at the result.

For a moment, all four of them gazed in silence at the red sand in the Gryffindor hourglass and the golden figure at the bottom.

"Lu," said Deanna at length, "is it me or is the Gryffindor glass looking distinctly emptier than usual?"

There was no doubt about it, the sand level was a lot lower than it had been yesterday. 150 points lower, to be precise.

Rianne gave a low whistle. "Now that's a lot of points lost. In fact, I do believe" here she began to grin, "that that puts them in last place."

Marlie gave a shriek of delight. "YES!!! We're back in the lead! There's no way they'll ever get that back! I'm safe, I'm safe, I'm safe!" She began to dance with joy.

"You most certainly are, Lovegood." said a voice from behind them. Luella turned to see it was a grinning Draco Malfoy. He gazed up at the points total. "And I didn't even have to blackmail him. Potter must have managed this one all on his own. Remind me to congratulate him when I see him." He sauntered off into the Great Hall.

The next to notice were the Weasley twins. Fred and George grinned at them.

"Hello, folks." Fred grinned. "Still trying to convince yourselves you can win it?"

The girls all grinned back. "Not exactly." Marlie purred. "More like, trying to convince ourselves that you were ever in with a chance."

The twins frowned. "What's that meant to mean, Lovegood?" George asked, puzzled.

Deanna raised her eyebrows. "You mean you haven't heard yet? We've got our lead back. You boys are in last place."

"Last place?" both boys shrieked. Fred elbowed his way past. "Let me see." He looked at the Gryffindor glass and his face fell. George came to see for himself and gazed in horror.

"It can't be true." Fred whispered. "There must be some kind of mistake."

"Oh, no mistake." Rianne gloated. "We're back to our winning ways."

George looked at them in frantic disbelief. "But 150 points gone in one night? How?"

"You might want to ask your little Seeker star." said Deanna coolly. "I believe he and his friends were caught out of bounds last night. Now, we're off to enjoy our breakfasts. Bye bye, Weasleys." She led the other three into the Great Hall, leaving the twins staring in horror.

Deanna and Marlie gazed around the hall as they entered. Marlie spotted Harry immediately, despite his best efforts to look unobtrusive.

"Harry!" she squealed. "Darling, let me be the first to congratulate you!" Harry went bright red and wished the ground would swallow him up. Next to him, Hermione hid her eyes while Ron seethed furiously. "You've just saved my place on the team and our Cup hopes! Sweetie, how can I ever repay you!"

"I must say, Potter," Deanna remarked, "150 points lost in one night, that's got to be some kind of record. What did you do, try and steal the Cup?"

"Hermione and me got caught out of bounds and lost fifty points each. Neville was out as well." Harry said bitterly. "Now please go away. I've already heard it all from Malfoy."

"Will do, Potter." Deanna said cheerily. "We just wanted to congratulate you. Losing that many points in one night, that's some achievement. Not even we've lost that many before."

"Not even the twins have lost that many before." Rianne added.

"This is the best day of my life!" Marlie sighed as the girls left them to their breakfasts and the accusing stares of their housemates. "Oh, happy, happy day!"

"One for the annals of Hogwarts history." agreed Rianne. "Do you reckon there's some kind of prize we can give him?"

"How about a replica of the House Cup with a little thank you message on it?" suggested Deanna. "Something like, 'We couldn't have done it without you, love Slytherin House.'"

"I take it you four have heard the news, then." Snape said from behind them, amused.

"Oh yes." grinned Deanna, turning to face him. "Oh, we've heard alright." Luella looked at their House Master. His habitual sneer had been replaced by a cruel grin.

"Isn't it wonderful, sir?" enthused Marlie. "We'll surely win it now!"

"No doubt. Although I'm sure it's quite unnecessary to find a replica of the House Cup for him. A simple greetings card will suffice, I'm sure."

"Now that's an idea." Deanna said thoughtfully.

"Dee, leave him alone. The poor kid's suffered enough." said Luella sharply. The other four turned to look at her. Snape in particular was regarding her very curiously indeed. Luella began to wish she hadn't said anything.

"Sheesh, I was just kidding." Deanna said, surprised. "As if I'd rub it in like that."

"I had no idea you were so magnanimous in victory." Snape said. "You surprise me."

Luella avoided his eyes. "Well, I feel kind of sorry for him." she mumbled.

"Indeed." Snape said dryly. He turned to go. "Well, I shall let you enjoy your meal. Good day, children."

Luella noticed her friends giving her strange looks. "What?" she snapped.

"What's up with you, Lu?" Marlie said in amazement. "We're dead certs to win again, and you're off feeling sorry for Potter? If he's silly enough to get himself caught out of bounds, that's his hard luck. Come on, brekky."

Luella shot Harry a look of concern as she followed her friends to the Slytherin table. Already, she could see empty seats next to Harry, Ron and Hermione. They're shunning him already, she thought. Poor kid. She looked away guiltily, unable to meet Harry's eyes, and went to sit down.

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Chapter Twelve Out of Bounds

Weeks turned into months. Spring became summer. The term passed away, the exams came and went, and finally the last week of term came round.

Marlie stretched back on the grass with a sigh. It was a gorgeously sunny June day, and Marlie had removed her Hogwarts robes to reveal a tight-fitting black t-shirt with 'something witchy this way comes' emblazoned across the chest and a pair of denim shorts. She was now engaged in getting a tan and relaxing.

"All over for another year! And once again, we're going to win."

"Don't count your chickens, Marls." Rianne warned her. "If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw tomorrow, it could be a close run thing." She was still wearing her Hogwarts uniform, but a couple of Cooling Charms had put paid to over heating.

"Not close enough, thanks to the Boy Who Got Caught." Deanna grinned. "Quit worrying. Just enjoy the feeling of being back on top again." Like Marlie, she'd discarded her robes in favour of summer gear, although her Iron Maiden t-shirt couldn't have been more of a contrast with Marlie's ultra-girly look. Deanna had recently been converted to the joys of heavy metal, much to her dorm mates' chagrin.

Marlie sighed with sheer happiness. "No work to do. Slytherin dead certs to win the Cup. The sun's out. Doesn't get much better, does it?"

Next to her, Luella sneezed. "Trust me, it could." she muttered. "If I didn't have this wretched hayfever." She reached for another tissue and wiped her eyes.

"Lu, stop rubbing them." Rianne told her. "You'll only make it worse."

"They itch!" said Luella irritably. "What am I meant to do, just leave them? God, I hate this time of year. Honestly, it was my birthday yesterday, and the day was practically ruined because I couldn't stop sneezing." She blew her nose. "Screw this, where's the nearest chemist?"

"Glasgow." said Deanna.

"God almighty." Luella pounded the ground in frustration. She suddenly noticed that Deanna seemed unaffected by the pollen count. "Wait a second. You're normally worse off than me! What's your secret?"

Deanna gave her a patronising look. "Muggle-borns. Always overlooking the obvious." She produced a small phial from her robes. "Hayfever potion. Got Snape to brew some for me. He seemed happy enough to. Apparently he always makes up a huge batch in April, he gets so many Slytherins asking him for some."

"You mean you've been letting me suffer like this since May!" Luella said in disbelief.
"Deanna Tyler, you little... Does he have any left?"

"Loads." Deanna yawned. "Go ask him, I'm sure he'll be quite obliging."

"Right. See you guys later. When you next see me, I shall be the all-new, non-suffering, pollen-free Luella Martin and I shall be giving Deanna Tyler the kicking of her life for not telling me sooner." Luella got up. Marlie called her back.

"Lu, while you're up, can you get some CDs for us?"

"CDs??"

"And my portable stereo as well, if you could. I fancy some tunes on."

Luella shook her head in amazement. "Marlie Lovegood, if there's anyone lazier than you in the school, I'd like to meet them. Shall I get you an ice cream as well? Perhaps a glass of Coke with ice in it, and little parasols and glace cherries on cocktail sticks as well, hmm?"

"If you could, Lu." Marlie grinned as she pulled her sunglasses back over her eyes and lay back. Sighing, Luella set off for the school.

Luella staggered back in to the Entrance Hall. A bagful of CDs, Marlie's specially adapted stereo, and enough hayfever potion to knock out a small animal did not exactly weigh lightly on her shoulders.

She stopped near the doors to massage some life back into her shoulder and give herself a rest. And immediately heard voices coming from the steps outside.

"Why me?" Hermione was demanding. Luella pricked up her ears in interest.

"It's obvious." said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know." He switched to an unnervingly accurate falsetto. "Oh, Professor Flitwick, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong..."

"Oh, shut up." Hermione snapped. "All right, I'll keep an eye on Snape. What are you two going to do?"

Keep an eye on Snape? Luella began to have a horrible feeling about this. Harry was speaking again.

"We'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor. Come on, Ron." They began to walk in. Hastily, Luella willed them not to see her. They walked right past her, oblivious. Hermione ran off towards the staff-room, while Harry and Ron disappeared upstairs. Luella watched them go in concern, before picking up her things and hurrying out.

"Did you get them?" Marlie asked as Luella dumped her bag and the stereo next to her.

"No, I thought I'd carry this thing around with me for the fun of it." Luella said. "I got your Sixties CD, Hits of 1991, Now 20, Like A Prayer, Slippery When Wet, and to keep Deanna the metalhead happy, Appetite For Destruction. And if anyone wants any more, they can get their own. I'm officially knackered." She flung herself down on the warm grass.

"GNR! Cool!" Deanna grinned. Putting the CD on, the air was soon rent by the opening chords of "Welcome to the Jungle".

"Deanna!" Marlie and Rianne yelled at her. Marlie peered over her Ray-Bans at Luella.

"Lu, why did you have to inflict that noise on us? Couldn't you have got Abba instead?"

Deanna looked indignant. "This is a classic album, I'll have you know."

"Compared to what? Cars being crushed? Because that's what it sounds like!" sneered Marlie.

"Huh! Some people have no taste." Deanna sniffed. But she did agree to turn the volume down.

Luella meanwhile had other things on her mind. So Harry and Ron were watching the third floor corridor while Hermione kept tabs on the staff room. That could only mean one thing. They knew about the Stone. She stared broodily into the lake. Not only did they know it was there, they also knew someone was after it. And knowing them like she did, the chances of them trying to intervene were high. They'll get themselves killed! she thought. They don't stand a chance against that dog, and I bet there's other things there too. She remembered Mrs. Tyler telling her to stay out of things, it was too dangerous. And Rianne making her promise not to go venturing out after hours again. But on the other hand, she hadn't actually promised to mind her own business, had she? Just said that she didn't have any plans to do it again. And at the time, she hadn't...

Which is why a black-clad Luella Martin slipped quietly out of the Slytherin common room unnoticed and unnoticeable later that night, and raced straight up to the third floor, using the secret passage she'd used before. Walking to the door, her heart sank to see it was already open. She peered inside. The dog was asleep but stirring, close to wakefulness. The trapdoor had been left open and a small harp was lying next to it. Looks like someone had got there first.

She was distracted by footsteps coming down the corridor. Backing away from the door, she turned to see who was coming. No one. And yet she could hear these footsteps.

She backed away, drew her wand and waited. The footsteps drew nearer and nearer. Then stopped. Suddenly, there was a swish of material, and Harry, Ron and Hermione were there. Harry was rolling a cloak of some kind up. He turned to the others.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you. You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid." said Ron.

"We're coming." said Hermione.

"No, you're not." Luella said meaningfully, dropping all camouflage. "You'll stay well out of this if you know what's good for you."

The three Gryffindors spun round. Luella got a quiet kick out of seeing the stunned looks on their faces.

"You!" gasped Harry.

"That's right. Me." Luella gave them her most piercing stare. "Don't even bother lying to me, Harry. I know what you're after. I think I know why you're doing it too. But I'm telling you, if you know what's good for you, you'll go back to your dorms now."

"Don't threaten us, Martin!" Ron snapped. "You're outnumbered and your dueller mate's not here now, is she?"

"I'm not threatening you. I'm warning you. Stay out of it, it's far too dangerous, you'll get yourselves killed!" She gave them a pleading look.

Harry shook his head. "Luella, you don't understand. There's a Philosopher's Stone in there, it can make you immortal. Professor Snape's gone in there to steal it, he's working for You-Know-Who and he's trying to bring him back! If we don't stop him, You-Know-Who'll kill us all!"

"Snape?" Luella would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so desperate. "Harry, it can't be, Snape wouldn't do that. I know you don't like him much," here Ron scoffed hollowly, "but he's not evil! He wouldn't be working for Voldemort."

Hermione shook her head. "He tried to kill Harry at the Quidditch match. And Harry heard him threatening Quirrell trying to find out how to get past some of the enchantments. I know he's your House Master and all, but that doesn't change the fact he's on the other side!"

Luella shook her head. Now that someone else was actually accusing Snape, she was suddenly aware of how much she wanted to defend him. And certain, certain beyond doubt that he was no more in league with Voldemort than she was. She remembered his eyes gazing into hers after she'd been attacked by Voldemort, the emotions she'd seen there. The way he'd carried her back to his office and comforted her. The pride he'd shown after she'd fought Voldemort off.

"You're wrong." she whispered. "You're wrong!" She shook herself. "I'm sorry, Harry. But I can't let you go through that door. You'll be killed. I'm really sorry about this." She raised her wand. However, Hermione was quicker. "*Locomotor Mortis!*"

Luella yelled as her legs shot together and buckled underneath her. Ron swiftly stepped forward, grabbed her wand and threw it out of her reach.

"Right." he said confidently. "That's sorted that out. Let's go."

Hermione looked miserably at her as she followed the boys through the door. "I'm sorry, Luella." she whispered. Then she was gone.

Luella could only stare in disbelief. "You little bastards!" she whispered, trying to crawl towards her wand. She began to laugh helplessly. Bested by a group of first years! If only Deanna could see this. Still, you had to hand it to them. For a bunch of Gryffindors, they fought like Slytherins, and she could think of no better compliment.

For the second time that night she heard footsteps approaching. This time, she didn't bother trying to hide. Rolling over, she gazed straight into Filch's eyes. And for once, she was actually pleased to see him.

"Well, well, well." he whispered, eyes gleaming. "Out of bed and out of bounds. And Professor Snape always told me how law-abiding you were. He's not going to be happy with you."

Luella clutched at this straw of hope. No, Snape wasn't going to be happy, but he was her best chance.

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Filch." she said gazing back at him. "I've behaved appallingly badly. I deserve to be expelled. Thrown out. Sent packing. I am the shame of Hogwarts. In fact, we may as well get it over with. I insist you fetch Professor Snape now. Let me be punished, wretch that I am!"

Filch looked startled. He'd never had a student actually want to be punished before.

"You... you actually want punishing? You actually want me to get Professor Snape?"

"Of course. I deserve nothing less. I am an unreformable delinquent. I deserve nothing less than the most vehement sarcasm he can come up with. In fact, I deserve worse."

Filch backed away, looking at her as if she'd gone mad. "Worse than sarcasm? What, you want *irony*?"

"Well, it'll do at a pinch, but I'm sure it won't be enough for someone as corrupt as me."

Filch's eyes bulged. "You surely can't mean... surely not... *satire*?"

Luella bowed her head. "I deserve nothing but the very worst."

Filch couldn't take it in. "You want Professor Snape to be satirical at you? You actually *want* him to use *satire*??" He looked terrified.

"Yes please." Luella said calmly. "So, er, can you get him then?"

"Erm, yes, yes of course, I'll be right back." Filch took a few steps backwards before turning and running off.

Luella grinned to herself. This manipulation lark wasn't nearly so hard as she'd thought.

She lay there in the darkness for what seemed like hours. Finally, she heard footsteps coming towards her. Turning gratefully towards the sound, she smiled as Snape came striding up the corridor, wand in hand. He performed the counter charm and waited while Luella got to her feet and retrieved her wand.

She looked nervously at him. He didn't exactly look angry, more intrigued.

"Mr. Filch tells me you wanted me to use satire on you. Is that true?"

"Um. Not really, no."

"Relieved to hear it. If it was, I'd have to wonder about you. As it is, you've left the poor man quite unsettled. I had to give him a Nerve-Calming Potion before he could tell me anything." His expression changed to a rather less friendly one. "So. Miss Martin. I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for your presence out of bed after curfew, just outside a strictly out-of-bounds area with the Leg-Locker Curse on you, but I'm having difficulty thinking of one at the moment. Be so kind as to acquaint me with the story behind it. If it's sufficiently entertaining, I might even be so lenient as to excuse you from detention."

Luella recalled what she was doing there in the first place. "Professor, it's Harry, Ron and Hermione. They've gone after the Philosopher's Stone, they think someone's trying to steal it!"

"What?? How on earth... Never mind." He looked sharply at the open door. Luella watched as his face went pale. "Oh gods. They're in there, you say?"

"Yeah. And I think someone else is in there too, because the door was open before they arrived."

She hadn't thought Snape could look any more horrified, but she was wrong. He turned swiftly to her. "We haven't a moment to lose. Come to my office immediately."

Snape didn't say anything else to her as he led her back to the dungeons. He was walking so fast she had trouble keeping up. She followed him to his office and sat

down. Snape said nothing to her, just threw a handful of what looked like Floo powder into the fire and called "Caitlin Tyler at the DDAE. Secure line. Password Dream Weaver."

Mrs. Tyler's face appeared in the flames. Luella gave an involuntary start.

"Severus, I was just about to call you! Albus Dumbledore's just turned up here wanting to know why we owled him. Which we most certainly didn't. What is going on?"

Snape's face was grimmer than Luella had ever seen it. "Caitlin, he's done it. He's gone after the Stone tonight. You've got to send Albus back here immediately. Use this connection if you like."

"OK, we'll be right there." Mrs. Tyler said levelly, although she looked worried.

"That's not all. Potter, Granger and Weasley have gone in there after him."

"What?" she screamed. "Severus, why didn't you stop them??"

"I didn't find out until they'd already gone in." he said testily. "And Albus is the only one who knows how to get past all the enchantments. I'm not getting the other leg nearly ripped off too."

Mrs. Tyler shook her head. "OK. Whatever. I'm on my way." She disappeared. Moments later, the fire flared green and Mrs. Tyler was there in person. She was quickly followed by Professor Dumbledore. Both had their wands out.

"Well? Where are they?" Mrs. Tyler said coldly. She noticed Luella standing there. "Luella? What are you doing out of bed?"

"She was the one who raised the alarm." Snape said quietly. "Albus, Caitlin, we have to go after them, there's no way three first years can take on Quirrell and Voldemort, even with the latter in his current weakened state."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well, Severus. Let's go. I want you both with me."

Snape nodded. He turned to Luella. "You had best go to bed. I'll talk with you further tomorrow."

However, Dumbledore overruled him. "No, bring her. If she fought off Voldemort once, she may be able to do it again. Come, we have no time to lose." With that, he led them off. Luella, not at all sorry to be invited along, raced after them.

Dumbledore led them straight to the statue of Morgan LeFay. "There's a passage here which will take us straight there. Severus, I daresay you know of it already, but Caitlin and Miss Martin won't."

"Yes, I do." Luella and Mrs. Tyler said automatically. They both looked at each other in surprise. Snape and Mrs. Tyler immediately started to grin. Luella began to wish she'd kept quiet. Dumbledore just raised an eyebrow.

"Is anything secret around here anymore?"

"Um, Mel found out about it from Remus." Caitlin said, blushing.

"The Weasley twins told me." Luella admitted.

"Not that you've ever had cause to use it, Miss Martin." Snape said sternly.

"Of course not, sir." said Luella innocently. Snape didn't say anything, just watched as Dumbledore opened the entrance and led them inside.

They emerged a few minutes later on the third floor. Dumbledore stepped forward and prepared to open the door. However, he didn't get the chance.

The door burst open and Ron and Hermione staggered out. They pulled up short to see the four of them there. And when they saw Snape, their jaws dropped.

"You!" gasped Ron. He stared wildly. "But you're meant to be... I mean, aren't you..." He stopped short, dumbfounded.

Luella grinned. "See? Told you it wasn't him." She looked around. "Where's Harry?" she asked in surprise.

"Where indeed." Snape said dryly. "And shouldn't you two be in bed?" He was giving them his most dangerous look.

Dumbledore stepped in. "He's gone after him, hasn't he?" Ron and Hermione nodded. Dumbledore turned to the three adults. "We can't lose any more time. Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, return to your dorms now." Ron and Hermione, after registering the looks Snape was giving them, turned tail and ran. Dumbledore strode towards the door. He never made it.

Luella felt it strike again. Once again, she felt Voldemort's rage and animosity hit her, except this time it felt different. As if it wasn't actually aimed at her, but was strong enough for her to feel. She sank to the floor clutching her head in pain.

"Get off me!" she hissed to no one in particular. Snape spun round and dropped to her side instantly.

"Oh my god, Luella, are you all right?" Mrs. Tyler gasped. Snape gently held Luella's hands in his own.

"It's happening again." he said quietly. "Luella, fight it!"

Dumbledore turned to Mrs. Tyler. "Caitlin, you and I will have to go alone. Severus, stay with her, help her fight him. She can do it as effectively from here as she could down there. Caitlin?"

Mrs. Tyler bit her lip but said nothing, just following Dumbledore through the door, leaving Snape and Luella alone.

Luella struggled furiously. "Damn you, get off me, get out of my head!" she snarled. Eyes shut tight, clutching at her hair, she writhed in pain. Snape desperately tried to keep hold of her, but every time he went near her, she just screamed even louder and pulled away.

"Luella, talk to me." he said desperately. "What's happening?"

Luella gathered her wits long enough to answer. "Voldemort." she hissed. "He's here, he's fighting me." She paused. "No, that's not true, he's fighting someone else." Her eyes widened. "*Harry!*" She staggered to her feet. "I have to go and help him!"

Snape grabbed her wrist. "Don't be so foolish, girl. Professor Dumbledore and Caitlin Tyler are there, do you think you can do anything they can't?"

"I'm the Redeemer, it's my job to fight him!" she snarled, breaking free in her rage and desperation. However, she felt her knees buckle as the hate from Voldemort intensified. Snape caught her as she fell and lowered her to the floor.

"Do you see what I mean? What you are receiving from him at the moment would kill you or drive you mad before you reached him. Your best, your only option, is to fight from here. Like I showed you before, like you have done before. Take the rage and hate, add your own and send it back! Let him feel your fury!" he hissed, staring into her eyes. Luella stared wildly back at him, her features contorted with anger. Snape flinched to look at her. Luella laughed harshly.

"Damn him. All right. He'll feel it. He'll feel every single thing I can throw at him!" She spun to face the door and concentrated harder than she'd ever done before, feeling rage pour out of her. Pain seared through her head, and the world span. She dimly heard Snape calling her name in alarm before the pain in her head intensified and the world went dark.

Caitlin raced after Dumbledore, as he performed the shortcut charms that enabled them to bypass the various obstacles. She noticed a huge Devil's Snare plant, a giant chess set, little keys fluttering around, and a set of potions accompanied by a tricky little logic puzzle that could only have been Severus's handiwork. Finally, Dumbledore had navigated them all, and led her into the room containing the last enchantment.

Caitlin, despite her years of Auror work, nearly screamed when she saw the sight in front of her. Harry and Professor Quirrell were locked in combat, wrestling on the floor. Quirrell was screaming, desperately trying to break free of Harry, who had grabbed his face and was holding grimly on, grimacing in pain. However, that was not what had alarmed her.

Quirrell's turban was off him, and in the back of his head was a face. A white face. With slits for nostrils and a pair of red eyes she knew only too well.

"Oh my god." she whispered. Forgetting her Auror training she raced forward. "Harry! Harry!" she screamed. An invisible shield caught her, flinging her backwards into Dumbledore's arms. Gasping, she struggled to her feet.

"A protective ward." he said quietly. "We can't get near him unless something happens to break it down. Nor can we cast any spells, they'll just bounce right back at us. We need to distract Voldemort somehow."

Caitlin wrung her hands. "How?" she whispered.

"That's what I was hoping Miss Martin could do. However, if Severus has taught her well, we might not need her here." Dumbledore said cryptically.

Caitlin stared at him. "What do you mean...?" She was interrupted by a piercing scream. Spinning round, she gasped.

Voldemort's face was contorted in agony. It was he who was screaming. "Nooo!" he howled. "Stop! Get out of my head, damn you, bitch!" he snarled. Quirrell screamed in a grotesque parody of harmony, desperately trying to thrust Harry away from him.

"That's what I was waiting for!" Dumbledore gasped, racing forward. Sure enough, he was able to pull Quirrell off Harry, sending him sprawling. Turning to the now unconscious Gryffindor, he cupped the boy's face in his hands.

A movement caught Caitlin's eye. On the far side of the chamber, Quirrell was clambering to his feet and reaching for his wand, preparing to throw a deadly curse at the distracted Dumbledore. Caitlin didn't hesitate as years of training came in to play. She lifted her wand as if in a trance and pointed it at him, feeling the power flow as the words came to her lips all by themselves.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Green light flashed and a silent, invisible killer raced straight towards a horrified Quirrell.

"Nooo!" he screamed as the curse hit him. He fell to the floor immediately. Caitlin didn't even bother checking his pulse. When she used the Killing Curse, it worked. Distastefully, she kicked him over to check the back of his head. Voldemort had vanished. Cursing, she turned to see Dumbledore facing her, a look of shock on his face.

"What?" she snapped. "Never seen an Auror in action before?"

"You killed him!" he whispered. Getting to his feet, he stared at her in disbelief. "You actually killed him!"

Caitlin shrugged. "He's a Dark wizard. I'm Deputy Head of the DDAE. I've got licence to kill. And he would not have shown you any mercy, Albus."

"You could have stunned him, Caitlin." Dumbledore said gently.

Caitlin paused, staring at Quirrell. When she spoke, her voice had lost its harshness and sounded far softer. "He tried to kill my godson. He would have killed you. He'd literally let Voldemort into his very soul. There lies the difference between our respective houses, Albus. We don't forgive easily. And we don't do mercy very well. I assure you, Severus would have done the same. As would Melissa."

Dumbledore gazed sorrowfully at her. "But at what cost, Caitlin?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she knelt next to Harry. "Will he be all right, Albus?" she whispered.

"I don't know. He's alive, but only just. Had we arrived any later, he wouldn't have made it." He began searching the boy's pockets. "I need to know if he managed to retrieve the Stone. Wait a second, ah, here it is." He brandished the Stone triumphantly. "Nicolas will be relieved." A shadow fell over his face. "Yet also saddened. We can't allow the Stone to continue to exist, you know. It's just too dangerous."

Caitlin nodded mutely. "Will he agree, do you know?"

"I think so. He was saying only the other day how bored he was getting of immortality. I'm of the opinion that he'd actually like to see what death's like. It's the only thing he hasn't tried yet."

"I've got friends like that." Caitlin grinned. Her smile faded as she remembered which ones. "Had friends like that." she corrected. She gazed around the room and noticed the Mirror of Erised for the first time. "Now Albus, you never did tell us exactly what you wanted that for." she said, intrigued.

"Ah, now I'm glad you noticed that." Dumbledore beamed. "Part of the enchantment protecting the Stone. Only one who looks in the Mirror and wants to find the Stone, find but not use it, can get hold of it. Everyone else will just see themselves making elixir or something similar. Ingenious, isn't it?"

Caitlin smiled. "Albus, you're as cunning as a Slytherin. Very devious." She stepped up to the Mirror, suddenly curious. She gazed into its depths. And stepped back, hand clutched to her mouth in horror. Dumbledore stared at her in concern.

"Caitlin? What is it?"

Caitlin, speechless, just shook her head in disbelief. She turned to look at Harry again. "Help me with him, he needs to go to the hospital wing. Maybe Severus can do

something." Dumbledore did not question her further, just conjured up a stretcher for Harry and lifted him on to it. Caitlin followed them out, holding herself, and trying not to think of what she'd just seen. Trying not to think of those hands caressing her skin, those dark, almost hypnotic, eyes gazing into hers, those lips passionately kissing her senseless... Not him. Please, not him. Anyone but him, she thought desperately. He can't be my heart's desire, he can't be! Not after all this time. And yet, the image of Severus Snape pulling her to him and kissing her wildly continued to haunt her long after she'd left the Mirror behind.

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Chapter Thirteen The Gift of the Fae

Luella woke up slowly. Such a strange dream she'd had, involving sneaking out at night, getting the Leg-Locker Curse thrown at her by Hermione, freaking out Filch so he'd get Snape, racing through the school with Dumbledore, Snape and Mrs. Tyler, then Voldemort attacking her again. Weird. Maybe she was ill. In fact, now that she came to think about it, her head was aching, and she felt really exhausted. Yeah, that'd be it. Flu.

She became dimly aware of voices. A man and a woman.

"She'll make it. She has to." the woman was saying. "Come on, you've done everything humanly possible for her."

"What if she doesn't?" the man was saying. Poor thing, Luella thought, he sounds worried sick. "What if she dies? What if it was too much for her? Gods, Caitlin, did I push her too far? Expose her to too much? She's only just fourteen, that must have been such a drain on her powers, grown mages would have suffered."

"Severus, she's the Redeemer. She can't die yet, she's got a destiny to fulfil."

"What if that encounter was it?? What if she's done it now? There's nothing in the prophecy saying the Redeemer'll survive the final battle. How on earth am I going to break the news to her parents? To her friends? How the hell is Deanna going to take something like that? Caitlin, I honestly don't think I could live with myself if she doesn't make it."

Luella opened her eyes. She was in a bed in the hospital wing, screens pulled round her. Next to the bed, Mrs. Tyler was sitting down, watching Professor Snape pacing the floor restlessly. He looked more anxious than she'd ever seen him, looking like he'd not slept or shaved in days.

The events of last night came rushing back to her. Oh gods, Harry...

"Mrs. Tyler?" she whispered. Mrs. Tyler turned round immediately.

"Luella! You're awake!" Her face lit up. On the other side of the bed, Professor Snape spun round. The look of sheer relief on his face as he slumped into a chair took at least ten years off his age. Luella felt that strange tingle go running up her spine again.

"Thank the fates you made it." Snape whispered. "We thought..." He gestured dismissively. "Doesn't matter. You're awake again. That's all that matters."

Luella pulled herself into a sitting position and rubbed her head. It was daylight, so obviously she'd been out for a few hours.

"My head." she groaned. "What happened? Last thing I remember is lashing out at Voldemort then passing out... Is Harry all right? Did you get the Stone? What happened to Quirrell?" Luella's voice rose urgently. Oh my god, is Harry OK? she thought wildly.

"One thing at a time, Luella." Mrs. Tyler said gently. "Yes, we got the Stone back. Yes, Harry's fine, Professor Dumbledore's with him now. As for Quirrell..." here she exchanged an amused look with Snape. "He, er, had a little accident while resisting arrest. I don't think you need worry about him any more."

"Somehow he managed to find himself on the wrong end of an Auror's wand." Snape said, grinning. "Freak accident, could have happened to anyone."

"Poor thing." Luella said. "Is he all right?"

"Um. Depends how you define all right. He's not actually in any pain, if that's what you mean." Mrs. Tyler said evasively.

"However, if you define all right as in having a pulse and breathing, then no, he's not all right." Snape remarked dryly, appearing to have recovered himself.

Luella's eyes widened. "You mean he's dead?"

"Er. Yes." Mrs. Tyler said.

Luella let this sink in. "What, really dead?"

"Yes, really dead." Snape said. "Pushing up the daisies, snuffed it, kicked the bucket. He has moved on into the world beyond. One more entry in the obituary column of life, one less sand-timer in the Grim Reaper's cottage. If he were any deader, Messrs. Idle, Palin, Jones, Chapman and Cleese would be writing a satirical sketch about him. Yes, he is definitely, truly, absolutely dead."

"And you killed him?" Luella said to Mrs. Tyler, amazed.

Mrs. Tyler hung her head guiltily and nodded.

Luella gazed in awe. "Cool!" she whispered.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Caitlin, I think we can definitely pronounce this one recovered. Miss Martin, you may return to your common room at your leisure. I daresay your friends will be quite relieved to see you again. Miss Tyler in particular has been quite concerned about you. As have we all." A shadow crossed his face again

"Concerned?" Luella asked, surprised. "I've only been unconscious for a few hours, haven't I?" She looked closely at their faces. They were giving each other 'are you going to tell her or am I?' looks. Luella began to have a very bad feeling about this. Not to mention the fact that there was no way Snape had accumulated that much stubble in one night...

"How long have I been out for?" Luella asked wearily.

"Luella, love, you were unconscious for three days." Mrs. Tyler said gently.

"Everyone's been worried sick about you. Severus has hardly left your side. He carried you up here himself."

Luella regarded Snape in amazement. She really couldn't imagine Professor Snape summoning up enough emotion to stay by someone's side for three whole days. Feeling rather embarrassed all of a sudden, she looked away. "You didn't have to do that." she mumbled.

"Think nothing of it." he said dismissively. "I would have done the same for any of my students." He paused. Something changed in his eyes as his face softened. "Well, maybe not just any of my students."

Luella felt herself going red. "Thank you, sir." she murmured quietly. Snape didn't answer, just looked away all of a sudden. Mrs. Tyler got up.

"Well, I think we'd better leave you to recuperate. Get plenty of rest and don't over-exert yourself, OK? Are you coming, Severus?"

"Right behind you, Caitlin. Quite apart from anything else, I've just realised what I must look like, and I'm in desperate need of sleep." Yawning, he followed Mrs. Tyler out. Luella lay back and closed her eyes, enjoying the warm, fuzzy feeling of knowing that Snape had been watching over her the whole time she'd been unconscious. Daydreaming about being carried to the hospital wing, she allowed herself to doze off.

She was woken up by voices coming from what she assumed was the next bed.

"Harry!" a girl shrieked. "You're OK! We've been so worried about you, Dumbledore thought you were going to -" The girl, who Luella's tired mind was alert enough to recognise as Hermione, broke off.

Ron's voice was next. "What happened down there, Harry? Dumbledore won't tell us, Snape certainly won't, and apparently Luella's nowhere to be found."

This mention of her own name roused her. She recalled that, respect these little first years as she did, she had a score to settle. She reached under her pillow out of habit and felt her fingers curl around what proved to be her wand. Clearly Snape knew her all too well. Sliding out of bed, she pushed the screens back and walked quietly over to the next bed, also shrouded by screens.

"Guess we really owe her an apology." Harry was saying sheepishly. "After all, she was right about Snape."

"She was indeed." Luella said dryly, pushing back the screens and stepping inside. The sight of their horrified, rather guilty faces looking back at her amused her no end. This was going to be fun. "Next time, Potter, listen to your elders. You may find this hard to believe but they do actually know more than you." She slid casually into a convenient chair.

All three of them were avoiding her gaze. Harry and Ron both mumbled something. It was Hermione who looked contritely at her.

"Lu, I'm really, really sorry I put the Leg-Locker Curse on you. And we're sorry for not listening to you. Aren't we?" She gave Harry and Ron an extremely penetrating look. Both boys mumbled apologies.

"Good." Luella said coolly. "I'm sure you had your reasons, anyhow. So come on then. I want to hear what they are. From the beginning, please. All of it. I'm waiting."

So Harry, Ron and Hermione launched into an account of the year's adventures, from discovering what was in the corridor, to Hagrid letting slip about Nicolas Flamel, to suspecting Snape after the Quidditch match against Slytherin, then the conversation Harry had overheard between Snape and Quirrell. Finally, the discovery that Voldemort was involved and the decision to go for the Stone themselves when they found out Dumbledore had been lured away. Luella nodded thoughtfully.

"So you thought Snape was after the Stone to give to Voldemort. Well, I suppose I can't blame you for suspecting him, he is a complete bastard to you all, isn't he?"

"You noticed!" Ron said sarcastically. Luella grinned.

"I'm not completely blind to his faults, Weasley. But this I do know - he's no Voldemort supporter. And I'll tell you why I believe that after you bring the story up to date. So. You immobilise me and get through the door. Then what?"

The three Gryffindors immediately launched into an account of how they'd got through the various enchantments. Luella listened, impressed. She was particularly taken with the logic puzzle that Snape had devised.

"Brilliant! Oh man, that's amazing. Professor Snape rules!" Luella grinned. She took in the looks that the others were giving her. "What? Stop looking at me like that. I happen to like him, OK? Then what happened?"

Harry took up the story, explaining how he'd sent Hermione back to get help, then gone on to face Quirrell in front of the mirror. This part was also new to Ron and Hermione, so all three listened intently, gasping with shock in all the right places. When Harry described seeing Voldemort's face in Quirrell's head, Hermione screamed, Ron looked like he was going to be sick, and even Luella was taken aback.

"In his head? Voldemort was physically part of him? God, that's gross!" She looked revolted. "No wonder I felt as bad as I did near him. No wonder! Go on, how'd you defeat him?"

So Harry explained how he'd realised Quirrell couldn't touch his skin, and used that to keep him at bay until help arrived. Which it did.

"And for which you have me to thank." Luella said tartly. "Who do you think it was who raised the alarm?"

Harry looked shocked. "But Ron, Hermione... didn't you two find Dumbledore?"

Ron shook his head. "Not us."

"No, we came out of the door to find him, Snape, Luella and Caitlin Tyler already there." Hermione said meekly.

"And your reactions on seeing Snape as part of the rescue party is the funniest thing I've seen in ages. Shame I didn't have a camera on me." Luella grinned. "Yes, Snape was perfectly innocent all along. After you lot had gone in, I got found by Filch. Who was his usual snide self. However, by beating him at his own game and practically begging to be thrown into the stocks and tortured, I was able to persuade him to fetch Snape. Well, OK, that's not strictly true. What I actually said was that I was completely corrupt and unreformable and deserved nothing less than the worst in sarcasm that Snape could throw at me."

"You actually asked for Snape to be sarcastic at you?" Ron asked, his mind boggling.

"Oh of course not, Weasley. After sufficient haggling, I was able to force it all the way up to satire."

"*Satire*???" Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at her. No doubt about it, Luella Martin was nuts.

"You know, that's exactly how Filch looked." Luella grinned. "Couldn't get away fast enough. He ran off to get Snape, who had to use several doses of Nerve-Calming Potion before he could get any sense out of him, and sure enough, Snape came to see what on earth was going on."

Ron grinned. "How many points did you lose?"

"None, he was so intrigued by the thought of someone actually wanting him to use satire, he forgot to be angry. And when I told him you'd gone after the Stone because someone else was trying to steal it, he forgot all about punishing me. Dragged me

straight back to his office, called up Mrs. Tyler, found out Dumbledore had just turned up there, got them both up here over the Floo network, and off we went. Where we ran into you two."

"What did Snape do to them?" Harry asked sharply.

"Nothing, with Dumbledore there. We just got told to go to bed." Hermione told him.

"I guess then that the four of them ran after you."

"Two." Luella corrected. "Mrs. Tyler and Dumbledore went after you. Snape and me stayed where we were. Which leads me to why I was convinced Snape's OK."

Ron snorted derisively. "Here we go. Another missive from the Professor Snape fan club."

"Ron, shut up." Hermione told him. "Go on, Luella, we're listening."

Luella felt her grin fade. How to explain why Voldemort was after her too? She wasn't at all sure she wanted to give away her secret just yet, especially not in the hospital wing. In the end, she decided to just give the facts and let them make up their own minds as to the reasons.

"Well Harry, you're not the only one on the Voldemort hit list. Ever since the year started, I've been getting these panic attacks. Really bad ones. And nightmares too, nightmares that someone, someone with red eyes, is after me, trying to kill me. And that day I collapsed in the Great Hall, that was when they hit their peak."

"We thought Snape was psychically attacking you." Harry said quietly.

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Hardly. I'm one of his top Slytherins, why is he going to attack me?"

"That's what I said!" Hermione pouted.

Harry was unrepentant. "Well, we thought he was after the Stone! Except we didn't know about the Stone then, but we knew something valuable was up there. We thought he was trying to force you to co-operate, to help him steal it."

"And then after, when you seemed so confident all of a sudden, we thought you'd caved in and he'd bewitched you." Hermione admitted.

Luella began to smile. "No wonder you didn't want to tell me about Nicolas Flamel! Good thing you did, though, I'd never have worked it all out if you hadn't."

"Yeah, Herm, what were you thinking of?" Ron snapped.

"I don't know!" Hermione said fretfully. "It was weird, I was determined not to say anything, but then I heard this weird voice in my head saying, tell her, tell her, and I found myself asking."

Luella briefly debated whether or not to tell Hermione about her mysterious Redeemer powers but decided against it.

"Well, whatever. You asked me and I went off to check with Deanna. Who, it turned out, knew exactly who Flamel was and why he was famous. And when I heard he was involved with a Philosopher's Stone, the penny dropped."

"Didn't tell us though, did you?" said Ron sourly.

"Well of course not!" said Luella, exasperated. "I knew by then that Voldemort was around, didn't I? The last thing I wanted you lot to do was to get involved! It wasn't some schoolkid adventure we're talking about, you know. We're talking about the return of Lord Voldemort!" She watched as Ron and Hermione flinched at the mention of the name. "Oh don't be such wusses. Good god, if you can't even bear to hear his name, how the hell are you ever going to fight him?"

"And how would you know?" Ron snapped. "You're Muggle-born, you don't know what it was like under him, you haven't heard your parents whispering about what those years were like!"

"True. But then, when you've fought him yourself, you don't need to." Luella's voice took on a sense of urgency. "Who do you think was behind my panic attacks? Voldemort. I don't know why, but he hates me. He wants to kill me. He very nearly got his wish, those attacks almost pushed me to the edge. Almost. Fortunately, Snape got to me first."

"Fortunately?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I'd rather face You-Know-Who, to be honest." Ron commented.

"That, Ron Weasley, just goes to show that you don't know what you're talking about!" Luella snarled at him. "I tell you, Snape saved my sanity. He taught me how to conquer fear. How to find my power. How to fight back. He told me that Quirrell was in league with Voldemort. And helped me respond with a few attacks of my own. Quirrell was off sick for three days after Snape was through teaching me, and I wasn't bothered again. And you all noticed the difference in me. And that is why I know that Snape is on our side."

"So... he wasn't trying to force you to help him steal the Stone then?" Ron said uncertainly.

"No."

"He was actually helping you fight You-Know-Who?" Hermione asked, stunned.

"Yes."

"But why would Snape go to all that trouble over you?" Harry asked in surprise. "And why does Voldemort want to kill you anyway?"

Good question, Luella thought. And for once, her natural Slytherin cunning had failed to come up with a decent excuse.

"No idea." she said lightly. "He's Lord Voldemort, does he need a reason? Probably annoyed that the top Slytherin in my year's a common Muggle-born. As for Snape going to all that trouble, you misjudge him! And you've forgotten four rather salient facts. I'm Slytherin. He's Head of Slytherin. He has a responsibility towards me he doesn't have towards you. And probably the most important thing, which you may find hardest to believe but still, Snape likes me! Ron, stop looking so repulsed. I'm one of Snape's favourite students. He will do things for me he wouldn't even consider doing for anyone else. Yes, it's not fair, but that's how he is. Will do anything for people he likes, is a complete bastard to everyone else."

"You don't say." Ron muttered darkly.

"Never mind that." Harry interrupted. "Why didn't you and Snape follow Caitlin Tyler and Dumbledore? You never did tell us that. And what did happen in the chamber? I remember someone screaming my name and someone pulling Quirrell off me then I passed out."

"Well, I don't know all of it as I was rather indisposed myself. But I'll tell you what I remember, and what little Snape and Mrs. Tyler told me." Luella steadied herself as the memory came flooding back. "Before I could get near the door, Voldemort attacked again. Well, he wasn't attacking me. He was attacking you, Harry, and I could feel the hate and the rage. And Dumbledore decided there was no way I could go any further, so he left me with Snape. Good thing he did. Snape helped me fight back like I'd done before. It appeared to work, but it was too much for me and I passed out. Don't remember anything else." Luella moved swiftly on, rather glad to have got that part out of the way.

"Anyway, next thing I knew, I was up here with Mrs. Tyler and Professor Snape watching over me. Turned out I've been unconscious for three days. I still don't know exactly what went on down there, but you'll all be relieved to know we got the Stone back, and Quirrell got his just desserts."

"Dumbledore told me Quirrell died after Voldemort left him." Harry said quietly.

Luella coughed delicately. "Did he? Well, I suppose he must have done. I heard that Quirrell accidentally managed to find himself on the wrong end of an Auror's wand, but never mind."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Caitlin Tyler killed him?"

"Well, if you want to put it like that, yes, although I personally think that trying to kill an innocent boy in front of the Deputy Head of the DDAE counts as suicide." said Luella.

"She really killed him?" Ron asked, openmouthed.

"Bloody hell, they were right about Gryffindors being slow on the uptake. Yes, Weasley, she killed him. Like I just said two seconds ago."

Ron and Hermione just stared at her. Then as one, they both said "Wow!"

Luella sauntered leisurely along the corridors of Hogwarts, heading back to her common room. Life felt pretty good. No sign of Voldemort anywhere that she could tell. The Stone destroyed and now out of reach. Quirrell dead and unable to hurt her again. And best of all, Harry's three days in the hospital wing meant Gryffindor had had to play a different Seeker, which meant Ravenclaw had thrashed them, which meant Gryffindor were 120 points behind Slytherin, firmly in last place. While she felt sorry for Harry, Ron and Hermione, she just couldn't help smiling.

Until she felt it. Not a panic attack. But something else. A strange, unnerving feeling of being watched. She spun round. No one there. But she could still feel it, as if someone was looking right at her. She turned round and began walking onwards, turning past the statue of Morgan LeFay and into the dungeons.

Still the feeling of being watched wouldn't leave her. And now she could hear footsteps too. She stopped. So did they. She started walking slowly. The footsteps followed her, matching her pace exactly. She quickened her pace, and grimaced inwardly as the footsteps followed suit. Drawing her wand, she turned round, ready to fight. No one there.

The fear began to rise. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "Who's there?" she hissed. "Show yourself!"

No one answered, but Luella could have sworn she heard a woman laughing. Not an evil laugh, more amusement. Familiar too. Was this some kind of joke?

"All right, you've had your fun." Luella snapped. "Come on, show yourself. Snape's office is only round the corner, it won't take me two minutes to go and find him. And I happen to know he's currently catching up on three day's worth of lost sleep, so he won't be in a good mood."

Is he ever? she thought she heard a voice telling her. I'm sure I recognise that voice, she thought. That's someone I know! She concentrated hard. There, in front of her, if she looked closely. A certain shimmering in the air. She focused on it, thinking come on, show yourself. And felt something fighting back. Luella pushed harder. A battle of wills ensued, Luella trying to get this person to show themselves, and the person refusing.

Then the voice came again, whispering gently in her ear. *You don't want to do that, Luella. You don't want to fight me, do you? Of course you don't. Why not just forget you ever felt anything and head on back to your common room?* Luella felt herself getting drowsy. What was she worried about, after all? Getting all worked up over nothing. If Deanna could see this... She was in the act of turning to go when she realised what was going on. Hold on, Lu. Isn't this...? Luella faced the slightly

shimmering patch again, the realisation dawning on her. Someone else has the same powers I do! she thought. And if that's the case...

She imagined the shimmering bit parting, fading away, dying. Fading away to reveal... The resistance suddenly gave way and Luella gasped, stumbling forward. The air stopped shimmering and a figure stepped forward. Luella felt her jaw drop. "You?"

"That's right. Me." Mrs. Tyler said easily. "Well done. Not many would have been able to do that! Congratulations. If I was authorised to give points out, you'd be getting ten of them. As it is, you'll just have to make do with the sense of achievement."

Luella felt her anger building. "What on earth do you think you were doing? You nearly scared me to death!" She was fuming. Best friend's mother or not, what the hell was Mrs. Tyler playing at?

Mrs. Tyler pouted. "Ah, Luella. I was just having a little fun. You don't want to ruin all my fun, do you?"

Luella resisted the attempt to get round her with ease. "Is that what you call it." she said flatly. "Just tell me what you were playing at. Please." she added, the habit of a lifetime's politeness being a difficult one to shake.

Mrs. Tyler became a little more serious. "All right. I was testing you. Wanted to see if it was true."

"If what was true?" Luella asked guardedly. Mrs. Tyler's charming smile faded.

"I can sense another of my kind." she said quietly. "Plus I overheard your conversation with young Harry and his friends. In particular that nice Miss Granger saying how she hadn't wanted to say anything about Nicolas Flamel to you, but then she'd heard this strange little voice telling her to tell you and had felt compelled to do it. So I thought I'd follow you and see for myself if my suspicions were correct."

Luella gulped. Mrs. Tyler was now regarding her with her motherly look. "How long have you had these powers, Luella?" she asked, gently. Luella hung her head.

"I'm not sure." she whispered. "Since my first year. That night we did Dream Weaver. Deanna didn't want to go through with it, so I looked in her eyes and told her she could do it. And she got the confidence to go ahead with it. Then a few weeks later, Marlie lost all confidence in her Quidditch skills, so I decided to try again. And it worked. I didn't use them after that, I was too scared to. Until this year when I discovered I could hide myself, stop others seeing me."

"But you can also make others notice you, really notice you, if you want to, can't you?" Mrs. Tyler said, a strange bittersweet smile on her face. "Like after you fought back at Voldemort. Severus told me how much you changed afterwards. And I knew then that it was more than just the flush of victory at work there."

Luella held herself. "What's going on, Mrs. Tyler? What's happening to me?" she whispered.

Mrs. Tyler stepped forward and hugged her. "Come on, dear. Come with me, and I'll explain everything. Let's see if Severus is capable of polysyllables yet."

As it turned out, Snape evidently wasn't, for his office door was locked and Mrs. Tyler could get no response. Sighing, she produced her wand and tapped a complicated rhythm onto it, causing it to spring open.

"He really should change the combination on this." Mrs. Tyler commented. "It's far too easy to break in and he knows what students are like." She led Luella inside and told her to sit down and wait while she slipped into Snape's private rooms.

From the other side of the door, she heard Snape swearing before realising just who'd woken him up.

"Well, hello there, Caitlin. Fancy seeing you here. Finally decided I'm just too sexy to resist?"

"As if. Get up, this is important. We need to talk."

"Can't we talk here?" Snape purred seductively.

"No. Needs to be in your office. Severus, for god's sake, put some clothes on!" Mrs. Tyler sounded quite horrified. "Oh very well, if you insist." Snape said reluctantly. A pause. "Well? Do I get any privacy? Or are you going to watch? I mean, I don't mind if you really can't take your eyes off me, but surely it's more normal to want to watch people take their clothes off?"

"Oooh, you...! I'll be waiting outside. Luella is with me, so if we could have you fully dressed, shaved and with your mind out of the gutter if that's at all possible, that would be nice. See you in five minutes."

Mrs. Tyler came out of the room seething. Luella looked at her in surprise.

"Is everything all right in there?"

Mrs. Tyler forced a nervous smile. "Yes, he's just getting out of bed now. He knows you're here so with any luck we'll be able to have a civilised conversation soon."

"Oh, OK." Luella said, hoping she sounded offhand. In reality, all sorts of quite bizarre thoughts involving Professor Snape in rather less than his usual black robes, using the sort of voice she'd just heard him address Mrs. Tyler with, were intruding on her mind. Swiftly trying to get her mind on more mundane subjects, she stared fixedly into the fire until she heard Snape enter.

"Well?" he said, irritably. "This had better be worth waking me up for."

"Oh, as if I'd disturb your beauty sleep for anything less than a real emergency." Mrs. Tyler smiled sweetly. "Luella's discovered a few new abilities, haven't you dear? Go on, show him."

Luella got up nervously. She wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to do, nor was she sure it would actually work with an audience. She looked at Snape. He was leaning back in his chair, looking rather bored. Mrs. Tyler's words earlier came back to her. "You can make people notice you, really notice you, can't you?" Luella turned and walked to the far wall, before turning around and concentrating. Bored by me, are you? she thought. We'll see. I am the Redeemer, let's have some respect!

Luella tossed her hair back proudly and felt the power surge through her. Folding her arms, she gazed coolly into her House Head's eyes. It had the desired effect. Snape's eyes widened, and he had to steady himself to avoid his chair falling backwards. Corvus squawked and fluttered back to his perch. Luella felt her spine tingling. Ah, not so bored now, are you? she smiled to herself. Grinning unashamedly, she looked away, turned to the left and stepped towards the door. Reversing the power, she thought, don't notice me. Don't see me at all.

Luella shot another glance at Snape. He was staring at where she had been in astonishment. Smiling wickedly, she walked quietly so she was standing behind his chair, dropped her invisibility and coughed quietly.

"Um... sir? I'm over here."

Snape twisted round, startled. However, he swiftly recovered his usual composure, giving her an appreciative smile.

"I'm impressed." he said. "So now there's two Glamourers in my immediate social circle. And that brings the total number of them in the British Isles to...?"

"Two." Mrs. Tyler said. She was no longer smiling. "Sit down, Luella, love. There's a lot we need to discuss."

Luella did so, curious. "What's a Glamourer?"

"One who has the rare and dangerous power known as Glamoury." Snape told her. "And as Caitlin so rightly tells me, you and she are the only two known ones in the country. Once in a generation do we get even one. Rare indeed is it to find two."

Luella's mind reeled. "Oh my god." she whispered, unable to take it in. She looked at Snape. "How? I mean, why me? Does it have anything to do with...?"

"With your fate?" Mrs. Tyler said. "Yes, Luella, it may well do. Before the Fall of Slytherin, it was a relatively common power. Particularly among certain bloodlines. Have you ever heard of the Tal-y-Rhys family?"

"Yes." Luella said. "Your ancestors, aren't they?"

"They are indeed." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "And in times past, they were the most powerful magical family in these islands. They were here when the Romans came, they were here right up until the Norman conquest. The ordinary Muggles, back in the days when they were aware of us, referred to all us mages as the Fae, or the Fair Folk, but the word was also used specifically about the Tal-y-Rhys, by mage and Muggle alike. We were a breed apart, and most of the powerful mages of those days were related to us in one way or another. Rowena Ravenclaw was one of us. So was Salazar Slytherin. Which goes a long way towards explaining why Slytherins have historically got on better with Ravenclaws than with any other house. However, I digress. The point is, we were noted for hereditary abilities that other mages did not possess, referred to as the Gifts of the Fae. One of which is Glamoury."

"And you and I both have it." Luella said quietly. "What is it though?"

"Nothing more or less than the ability to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of others by magical means." Snape said. "You tell someone mentally not to notice you, so they don't. Or you can command someone to not only notice you but to fear you. Or make them believe you're someone else. Or do whatever you want them to do. Which is why it's so dangerous." He was gazing at her keenly. Luella shivered under that hypnotic stare.

"To be able to do all that!" she whispered. The enormity of it hit her suddenly. She held her head in her hands. "I'm terrified."

"Unsurprising." Mrs. Tyler remarked. "It scared me too. I realised I could have the world at my feet, and when I'd got it, realised I didn't want it. So many Glamourers have gone mad, bad or both from their powers. Fortunately, I got burned sooner rather than later. I'm sincerely hoping you'll use them wisely."

"Wisely?" Luella stared. "I don't want to use them at all! No one'd ever trust me again if it got out that I could control people without them knowing!" She stared fiercely at the floor. "I don't want this. God, why can't I be normal like everyone else?"

"Well, you're not." said Snape unsympathetically. "Get used to it."

"Severus, go easy on her." Mrs. Tyler said gently. "She's only a kid. You should be grateful, most teenagers would be out there using them to seduce half the school, acquire some willing slaves, sneak out at night and generally get up to all sorts of mischief."

"Oh gods, so they would." Snape said thoughtfully. "Miss Martin, I want you to promise that you will not use these abilities to break school rules or unfairly influence your teachers or fellow students."

Luella nodded. "OK. I also promise not to allow Marlie or Deanna to talk me into anything stupid unless there's a really good reason." She thought briefly. "A really good reason other than winding up Draco Malfoy."

"Very good." Snape nodded approvingly. "Do your friends know about your abilities?"

"Some of them. They don't know the full extent of them." Luella gazed into the distance. "I don't know how they'll react to this. Although they already know I'm the Redeemer so it probably won't be too bad. I can see Marlie and Deanna being quite impressed." A thought occurred to her. "Mrs. Tyler, if Glamoury's restricted to descendants of the Tal-y-Rhys, how on earth have I got it? I'm Muggle-born."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Your immediate ancestors may be Muggle. But the Tal-y-Rhys weren't like some of the pure-blood families of today. They freely intermarried with Muggles, and quite a few of their descendants turned out to be Squibs, that is, had no magic. They tended to live quietly as Muggles, marry Muggles and have Muggle descendants, occasionally producing the odd powerful mage. So it's not so far-fetched for you to have Tal-y-Rhys ancestry. You're also a Slytherin. These powers only ever crop up among Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Every single person with a Fae Gift since the Founding has been in one or the other."

"The Hat wanted to put me in Ravenclaw!" exclaimed Luella. "Said I was certainly bright enough. Unfortunately, I got carried away with the idea of being the smartest in the year and top of everything, and the Hat decided that with a lust for power like that, I belonged nowhere else but Slytherin."

Mrs. Tyler laughed. "Where have I heard that before?" Snape grinned and looked away.

"Ah, come on, Caitlin, you can't blame me for wanting to be the best!" He turned towards Luella. "Yes, I too nearly ended up in Ravenclaw and for much the same reasons. I believe Caitlin was nearly a Gryffindor."

"I think cunning and obsessional tendencies won out over daring and sheer nerve in the end." Mrs. Tyler said easily. "Only just, though."

Snape turned his attention back to Luella. "Anyway, turning away from this no doubt potentially fascinating discussion on where we were nearly Sorted to, is there anything else you were interested in knowing? Or shall we leave it there?"

"Let's leave it there. I think my head'll explode if I have to learn anything else right now." Luella said, her mind reeling.

"Understandable." Snape said coolly. "Very well, you may return to your common room, where your fellow Slytherins will no doubt be wanting to hear every single detail of your confrontation with Voldemort. I daresay I shall see you again at the Leaving Feast?"

"OK." Luella smiled, getting up. "See you then. Bye Mrs. Tyler, see you Saturday."

"Until then." Mrs. Tyler smiled as Luella left. "Bye, Luella."

As Luella re-entered the common room, she felt her heart stop as every single head turned to look at her. The room fell silent, as everyone stopped talking and Marlie switched off the sound system without a word. Feeling strangely uncomfortable with

the idea of so many people focusing on her at once, Luella sought out Deanna. It didn't take long.

Deanna got shakily to her feet. "Lu. Oh, Lu. Are you all right?" she whispered.

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Deanna's composure broke down as she rushed over to her friend and flung her arms around her.

"Oh, Lu, we've been so worried about you!" she sobbed. "No one would tell us what happened to you, and we've been hearing all these strange rumours about Voldemort and all sorts, and you were in the hospital wing, and so was Harry, and Professor Snape hardly left it, and, and we all thought something awful had happened, and that you were..." She couldn't get the words out. Luella comforted her tearful friend.

"Hey. It's all right. I'm fine. No need to cry. Sit down, I'll tell you all about it." Deanna nodded mutely and took a seat next to Marlie. Seeing the crowd of expectant Slytherin faces all watching her, Luella perched herself on a desk where everyone could have a good view. "Seeing as I'm going to get besieged with questions anyway, I might as well tell you all the whole story." Luella sighed.

"Yes please." Marlie said expectantly. "After all the rumours we've heard, it had better be good."

"Oh, it is." Luella promised. Settling back and producing a quick glamour to ensure attentiveness, she began to tell the story, leaving out any references to Glamoury or Slytherin Redeemers. "It all started back at the Welcome Feast..."

Snape turned back to Caitlin after the door closed. "Well, Caitlin, the end of another year." he said, smiling sardonically. "And once more, you and me end up helping to save the day again. We make quite a good little team, don't we?"

"I won't deny we work quite well together." Caitlin observed coolly. She allowed the ghost of a smile to cross her lips. "Our little Redeemer's made quite an impression on you, hasn't she?"

"She's young, intelligent, fiendishly cunning and talented, of course she has. I always hoped the Redeemer would be special and I've finally been proved right." Snape sighed, leaning backwards in his chair. "Another Glamourer! I shall have to keep my wits about me with that one. She'll prove to be an interesting challenge. At least she's mature enough to handle it. Could you imagine what it would have been like if Miss Lovegood had got a Fae Gift?"

"I can." Caitlin sighed. "Marlie's quite bad enough as it is, what with all that veela blood in her ancestry. Glamoury as well?" Caitlin shuddered. "Doesn't bear thinking about." She smiled at Snape. "Well, with that dealt with, I had better let you get back to catching up on your beauty sleep. Gods know you could do with it." She got up to leave, grinning.

"Sharp-tongued as ever, I see. Does your wit know no boundaries?" Snape said, rising effortlessly to his feet.

Caitlin thought briefly. "No." she replied.

"Cheeky vixen. Count yourself fortunate I like you." Snape stood, gazing into her laughing brown eyes. Like you? Only like you? the thought ran through his brain. Without knowing quite what he was doing or why, he stepped forward, slipped one arm around her waist to pull her closer, one across her shoulders, his fingers running through her hair, leaned towards her and kissed her for all he was worth. And wonder of wonders, felt her respond. Felt her arm sliding round him, her lips opening beneath his, felt her hand go running up his chest...

Felt his head connect very firmly with the edge of his desk as she shoved him violently away, coughing and spitting venomously. Rubbing the back of his head and clambering slowly to his feet, trying to get rid of the stars in his eyes, he looked reproachfully back at her. She was rubbing her mouth, as if to get rid the taste of him, and glaring furiously at him, her face flushed. Does she look like that when she's aroused, Snape mused idly, then hastily banished the thought.

"Don't you ever, ever, do that to me again, do you hear me?!" Caitlin hissed viciously.

"Do what to you? Show you how I feel? Tell you how beautiful you are? Turn you on?" Snape asked, his voice tinged with the usual defensive sarcasm.

"I was not turned on!" Caitlin snarled.

"So it was a reflex action, was it?" Snape snarled back. "Caitlin, I felt your tongue in my mouth."

Caitlin looked furiously at him. "You... you... You took me by surprise, that's all! Look, just stay away from me. I don't want you that way, I'm not interested in you, just take the hint and stop bothering me!"

"Look me in the eye and tell me that." Snape said softly. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me, that there's not a single part of you that has any positive feelings for me whatsoever." He walked over to where she was standing and gazed into her eyes again. "Tell me you don't love me, and I'll never bother you again."

Caitlin bit her lip and looked away, eyes shut. She didn't answer.

"Can't do it, can you?" he said, a strange half-smile on his face. "I thought as much."

"Severus, for Hecate's sake, just drop it." Caitlin whispered painfully. "Just... leave me alone."

"No." Snape said, feeling a new confidence surging through him. "No, I'm not going to leave this. I love you, Caitlin." He gazed desperately at her, searching for some kind of reaction, any kind of reaction. "I love you."

Slowly, Caitlin raised his eyes to his. Snape winced to see them filling with tears.

"Fifteen years ago, I'd have given anything to hear you say that." she whispered. "You could have had me like that." She snapped her fingers. Snape felt his heart sinking. Caitlin turned away and headed for the door. Before leaving, she turned and looked back at him.

"I loved you once, Severus." she said quietly. "Maybe somewhere deep inside, part of me still does. But I can't forget the past. And I can't forgive you. I'm sorry." Turning away, she opened the door and walked swiftly away, as if to put as much distance between them as possible, as quickly as possible, leaving Snape standing there alone, staring at the door closing quietly behind her.

The atmosphere on the Slytherin table at the Leaving Feast was even more exuberant than usual. Once more, Slytherin were the undoubted champions. The Quidditch Cup was already there, taking pride of place in the middle of the table, with little green and silver ribbons decorating it. And by the end of the evening, given the current points tally, the House Cup would be joining it.

"Another good year!" Marlie sighed. "Ah, Deanna, is there anything that can stop us?"

"Don't get too cocky." Rianne warned her. "It could still all go horribly wrong."

Marlie and Deanna stopped congratulating each other and turned to look at her in surprise. "How?" Marlie asked sceptically.

"Yeah, how? What could possibly close a one hundred and twenty point gap?" Deanna asked.

Rianne shrugged. "I don't know. But I still have this gut feeling that we're not out of the woods yet."

"You worry too much, Ri." grinned Deanna. "I'm telling you, the Cup's ours."

Luella motioned for quiet. "Never mind all that. Dumbledore's getting up!"

Silence fell around the Great Hall as everyone stopped talking and started listening. "Another year gone!" said Dumbledore cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts..."

"Now, as I understand it, the House Cup here needs awarding and the points stand thus: in fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty two; Ravenclaw have four hundred and five and Slytherin, four hundred and twenty two."

All around them, cheers broke out up and down the table. Luella noticed Mike Lovegood nearly throttling Jordan Foxworth with a hug. Draco was banging his goblet on the table while Kat Stormosi and Summer Montague high-fived each other.

"Yes, yes, well done Slytherin." said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

Across the table, Marlie and Deanna put each other down and looked quizzically at each other. Next to Luella, Rianne hid her eyes and murmured "I was afraid of this." The room went deadly quiet, and all down the table, Slytherins were giving each other nervous looks.

"Ahem." coughed Dumbledore. "I have a few last minute points to dish out. Let me see... First, to Miss Luella Martin of Slytherin."

Luella felt herself go red as the entire school turned to look at her. Feeling eternally grateful she was sitting with her back to most of them, she lowered her eyes to avoid the attention.

"For outstanding prowess in Defence Against the Dark Arts and outdoing her own teacher, I award Slytherin fifty points."

The table erupted. Luella blushed furiously, staring at the ground. Rianne hugged her and could be heard yelling "You go, girl!" while Deanna's voice, carrying across the entire room, was saying "My best friend you know, taught her everything she knows about Dark mages."

Dumbledore spoke again. The Slytherins stopped cheering and calmed down to listen.

"Next, to Mr. Ronald Weasley, for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

The Gryffindor table erupted. Across the Slytherin table, Deanna was hastily doing some adding up. "Well, if all three of them get fifty points, then they'll be ahead by forty, but then with Lu's fifty points factored in, we'll still be ten points ahead. It's OK. It'll be OK. We'll still win."

Dumbledore was speaking again. "Thirdly, to Miss Hermione Granger. For the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Over the roar of Gryffindor cheers, Luella could hear Marlie whimpering and Rianne whispering "This is going to be too close for comfort!"

"Fourth, to Mr. Harry Potter." The room went dead. Even Deanna looked worried.

"For pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

"Sixty???" Deanna screamed. "What did he do that Lu didn't?"

Rianne was hastily doing the necessary maths. "So that's four hundred and twenty two plus fifty, that's four hundred and seventy two for us. And three hundred and twelve for them, plus one hundred for Ron and Hermione is four hundred and twelve, plus Harry's sixty is... four hundred and seventy two." She looked up in horror. "They're level. It's a draw."

Marlie howled. "Noooo!! It can't be a draw, it can't be!" She buried her head in her hands.

"Better than losing!" Deanna snapped. "Well, I suppose they did earn it." She shrugged. "What the hell."

Quiet gradually returned. Dumbledore stepped up. Luella felt her heart sink. One more point either way would decide things and she had a feeling he was not done yet. "There are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

The Gryffindor table went wild. Cheering and screaming rent the air as Neville found himself mobbed by his housemates. It couldn't have contrasted more with the mood on the Slytherin table.

No one said a word, just stared in shock. Deanna was first to speak.

"We lost." she whispered. "We... lost. They beat us. They actually beat us. They won!"

Next to her, Marlie slumped forward onto the table, head buried in her arms, blonde hair covering her like a shroud.

"Ten points." Rianne said. "Ten lousy points! Damnation!" She pounded the table. "Tyler, if you hadn't skipped that lesson of Snape's back in December!"

"I was extremely distressed! What about Lu, losing us twenty points by grassing up Malfoy!"

"You leave me out of this!" Luella snapped. "If it hadn't been for me, we'd've been behind by a lot more than ten points!"

Marlie sobbed helplessly, oblivious to it all. "If only, if only we'd won that Gryffindor game!" she wept. "I'm off the team, my Quidditch career is over, it's all my fault!"

"Damn right it is." a voice growled from a few places down. Marcus Flint did not look pleased. "I didn't spend the last four years building a team to take on the world only to see Wonder Boy Potter and his Muggle loving friends snatch it from under our noses. Consider yourself dropped, Lovegood. You're a bloody liability."

Marlie wept even harder at this, but did not argue. Deanna tried to comfort her as best she could, but Luella could tell all too easily that the other Slytherins shared Flint's views, as the coldness in the air testified.

All of which meant that the planned end of year party got called off. Unsurprisingly, no one really felt like celebrating. Marlie just ran straight into her dorm crying, grabbed Snowy, drew the bedcurtains and refused to talk to anyone. Rianne withdrew to a quiet corner and tried to lose herself in a book. While Deanna said nothing to anyone, just strode in, ripped the banner with its cheery message of "We Are The Champions" off the wall, rolled it up and stormed back to the dorm. Luella followed her.

She found Deanna stashing the banner underneath her bed. Clytemnestra had flown in via one of the ventilation tunnels linking the Serpent's Nest with the outside world and had settled on her shoulder. Deanna tickled the falcon on the throat while gazing fiercely into the dorm fire. Luella sat down expectantly and waited for the rant to ensue.

"Did you see them all, Lu?" she whispered savagely. "All of them cheering and screaming, you'd have thought the Space Shuttle was taking off it was so noisy."

"They had won for the first time in seven years, Dee." Luella said quietly. "We'd have done the same if it had been us."

"Oh, we would have." Deanna said, smiling sarcastically. "But would Ravenclaw? Or Hufflepuff? Because they were tonight. Cheering for Gryffindor, for no other reason than that they beat us." She raised her eyes to look at Luella. "This is what you're up against, Lu. They hate us. They hate us when we win, they despise us when we don't. We're the lowest of the low to them. These green and silver sashes that we wear so proudly, they're like a yellow star to a Nazi as far as that lot are concerned."

"You don't mean that." Luella said quietly.

"No? Not seen the way Ron Weasley looks at you when he thinks you can't see him? Don't remember the way Fred and George used to taunt us before accidentally traumatising Rianne? Forgotten already how willing Harry, Ron and Hermione were to believe Snape was working for Voldemort? And how they believed he'd recruited you? Do you really think they'd have believed it if Snape was head of Ravenclaw? Or if the Sorting Hat had gone the other way and put you there? Come on. In their minds, Slytherin equals Death Eater, and you and I both know it. They don't trust us. All Slyths are bastards, that's their motto. Hell, they're probably right." Deanna looked depressed.

"We're not. You know we're not. Harry and Hermione know we're not." Luella said quietly.

"Wow! Support from two non-Slyths! Fantastic! Excuse me while I get the champagne out!" Deanna seemed less than thrilled.

Luella got up and went over to Deanna. "That'll change. It will change. There will come a day when they'll all change their minds about us. When the Wheel of Fortune drops you to your lowest point, the only way to go is back up again." She felt her own anger at being cheated of victory start to come through. "I'm going to do it, Deanna."

I'm going to redeem Slytherin. I'm going to singlehandedly wipe out the biggest threat to our kind there's ever been, and I'm going to be worshipped for it. And the name of Slytherin will never be used as an insult again. I swear it, Deanna. I swear it on the Great Serpent."

Deanna gazed into her friend's eyes and started to smile. "You mean it too, don't you?"

Luella nodded. She'd never felt so certain about anything before in her life. All of a sudden, the destiny she'd feared didn't seem like a punishment any more.

"Too right I mean it. I'm sick of being looked down on. My own house think I'm weak, and everyone else thinks I'm untrustworthy. And I'm getting just a bit tired of it."

"I don't think you're either, and I never have." Deanna grinned. "And I am with you every step of the way. Consider me your loyal sidekick. Your partner in crime. We can be Slytherin's answer to the Weasley twins. Well, we're practically sisters anyway."

"We'll avenge Slytherin together." Luella grinned. "The Twin Avengers, Tyler and Martin. I like that!"

"To us, then." Deanna laughed. "To the Twin Avengers!"

"The Twin Avengers." Luella smiled. The two of them clasped each others' hands. And there and then, Luella felt that nothing could stand in her way.

FINIS

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Slytherin Rising Part Three: Enemies of the Heir

by

J. L. Matthews

Chapter One

Escape From Privet Drive

August 1992. Lovegood Farm, Chudley, Devon. Nine thirty in the morning.

Marlene Lovegood, better known as Marlie, opened her eyes, feeling at peace with the world. The sun was shining in through a gap in the curtains, most of her holiday homework was done and she had very little to do today, other than test the magically adapted plasma globe she was working on. Of course, there was that request from her mother for a few tape recorders and microphones that could be concealed in an innocuous piece of jewellery, but apart from that, she had few problems. In the distance, she could hear hammering coming from her dad's workshop. She made a mental note to ask him later about the feasibility of making a digital sound recorder. After all, finding a tape that'd fit in a ring was pretty much a non-starter, unless her mother was prepared to start dressing all her agents like Narcissa Malfoy.

She was distracted by a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" Marlie yawned.

"Miss Marlie, you has visitors!" squeaked the voice of Sukey the Lovegoods' house elf.

"Visitors?" Marlie stared. "What, this early?" She looked at her radio alarm clock. Nine thirty four. What sort of sick individual was up and about at that time in the morning? "If it's a kid called Draco Malfoy, I don't live here. Throw him out."

"It is Mr. Fred and Mr. George from the Burrow, Miss Marlie." Sukey said, a little confused. Marlie groaned to herself. What on earth those two could want, she had no idea, but it was likely to involve trouble. Getting up, she hastily pulled on her dressing gown and slippers and followed Sukey downstairs.

Fred and George were waiting for her in the living room. Both raised eyebrows when Marlie walked in.

"Nice outfit, Lovegood." Fred grinned. "Pink suits you. It's her colour, don't you think George?"

"Indubitably, Fred. And that pink dressing gown goes so well with the Barbie nightdress and fluffy bunny slippers too."

"When you have quite finished dissecting my nightwear." Marlie said irritably. "What do you want? It's a little early to see you two up and about, isn't it?"

"Well, we didn't want to waste any time." said George. "Marlie, we need your help."

Marlie curled gracefully into an armchair with one fluid movement. "Ah. A favour is required. I should have guessed. What exactly do you want doing?"

"Not us. It's our brother Ron. He's a bit worried." said Fred.

"And this concerns me how?" Marlie purred. "I do hope you don't want his room Feng Shuied. It'll cost you if you do."

"He's worried about Harry." George said simply. Marlie sat up. Harry Potter's welfare was something else altogether.

"Harry? What, Potter? What's wrong with him?" she asked sharply.

"That's just it. We don't know. No one does. No one's heard a thing from him since he left King's Cross. It's as if he's vanished off the face of the earth. Errol's on his last legs what with all the letters Ron's been sending him, but there's been no reply. And we're worried about him." Fred said, his usual levity vanishing. "Ron keeps saying how Harry hates his Muggle relatives, how they're always being cruel to him, how they spent the ten years before he started Hogwarts mistreating him. And we're worried something bad may have happened to him."

Marlie gestured helplessly. "Boys, I feel your pain, but what can I do? I'm hardly a social worker, am I? And I'm at the other end of the country."

George grinned. "You might be, but your mates aren't, are they?"

Fred took up the argument. "We were discussing the situation ourselves last night, how we could go over there and see for ourselves what was going on. A reconnaissance mission, you know. But we realised that we didn't know where Harry lived."

"So we went through our mental address books, trying to think if we knew anyone who came from Surrey. And then it hit us." said George.

"Tyler and Martin." Fred grinned. "Tyler and Martin who live practically next door to each other, and as you're so fond of bragging to us, live virtually round the corner from young Harry."

Marlie began to see where this was heading. "Fred, are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"Come on, Marls, please?" George asked. "After all, Lu Martin's a friend of his too. And she knows where he lives. If you were to ask her nicely if she'd like to check up on Harry for us, make sure he's OK, I'm sure she would. And I'm sure Tyler'd be up for it, she loves a good adventure. Please?"

Marlie thought. If Harry really was in trouble, she could hardly stand by and let him suffer, could she? And Luella was a friend of his after all.

"All right." she said casually. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

Harry Potter stared miserably into space. He'd never felt so alone, so miserable, before. And given his childhood, that was saying something. He lived with his aunt and uncle, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, at Number Four Privet Drive, and had done ever since his parents had died eleven years ago. And it had not been fun. His parents had been mages, and so was he. The Dursleys, however, were not, and they hated everything about the magical community. And they'd never lost an opportunity to mistreat Harry.

That was how things had been right up until his eleventh birthday, when he'd received a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry telling him he was a wizard. And off he'd gone, to spend the best year of his life learning magic and making friends, both a novel experience for him. But now, school was over for the summer and he was back with the Dursleys. And ever since they'd found out he wasn't allowed to do any magic over the holidays, he'd been locked in his room virtually round the clock.

Harry sat huddled up on his bed, staring out of the window. What he wouldn't give now for a letter from Ron or Hermione, his two best friends. Or any other witch or wizard, just to prove it was real, that it hadn't been a dream. But he'd heard nothing, nothing from any of them. Not even Ron, who'd promised to ask him to stay with him. Had they all forgotten him? Did they really care about him at all? It was this apparent neglect from his friends, more than anything else, that really hurt. Trying not to cry, he tried to think of something else.

Think of his cousin, Dudley Dursley really suffering. Now that cheered him up. Unfortunately, it was unlikely to happen. Dudley was spoilt rotten by his parents, and he was the leader of his gang. There were only two people who had ever made Dudley suffer, and they were a couple of Slytherin witches two years older than Harry, who also lived in the area and had been to school with him. Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. Harry wished they were here now. If anyone could get him out of here, it was those two. They had a reputation for cunning, ingenuity and sheer nerve. And while he didn't know Deanna Tyler that well, Luella he did think of as a friend. He cursed himself for not having got her address and phone number. If he'd known where she lived, he could have met up with her over the holidays. It would be someone who could have kept track of him and raised the alarm in case of something like this happening. Too late now.

A sound distracted him. Was it... the door being unlocked? Hardly daring to believe his ears, he turned to see. Sure enough, the door swung open, and Aunt Petunia was standing there. However, she didn't seem to notice him at all. She was just staring blankly into the distance, arms hanging limply by her sides. And standing next to her, pushing past her into the room was...

"Luella!" he yelled with delight. Leaping off the bed and racing towards her, he flung his arms around her and hugged her for all he was worth. "Oh, Luella, am I glad to see you!"

Luella Martin laughed and extricated herself. "What did I do to deserve that? I'm glad to see you too Harry. What gives? We thought you'd forgotten us all!"

"Yeah, Potter, is your girlfriend not worth one lousy owl?" another voice drawled. Harry looked up, blushing. Deanna Tyler had followed Luella in and was watching them both with a grin on her face.

"Deanna, behave yourself." Luella said crossly. "Ignore her, Harry, she's just teasing."

"Oh yeah?" Deanna grinned. "You didn't have to put up with her pacing the floor saying 'Why hasn't he owled? Why hasn't he owled?' for the past month. Do you two want any privacy, by the way?"

Luella let go of Harry and walked firmly over to Deanna, raising a hand to slap her. Deanna dived out of the way, laughing. Luella turned back to Harry.

"Ignore her. She's always like that. Anyway, what's up, mate? Why no owls, eh? You've had us all worried sick." Luella's smile did not reach her eyes, which were giving Harry a very concerned look indeed.

"Couldn't. Uncle Vernon locked Hedwig in her cage and I can't write to anyone. And as soon as they found out I couldn't do magic over the holidays, they locked me in here. They won't let me go back to Hogwarts!"

"Not let you go back!" Luella gasped. "Well then, we've got to do something about that. Deanna?" Luella turned to Deanna, who wasn't listening. "Deanna, what are you doing?"

Deanna had produced a notepad, pen and tape measure and was examining the bars on the window, taking notes.

"Doing what we came here for." she replied crisply. "Reconnaissance. How thick do you reckon the walls are, Harry? And what's on the other side?"

Harry told her, bewildered. "But why do you want to know?"

"Your mates Fred and George asked Marlie to ask us to come over here and check on you." Deanna said. "So here we are. And while we're here, I thought I'd take a few notes, for when we all come back and bust you out of here."

"You're going to bust me out?" Harry said in wonder. "When?"

"We don't know yet. We need to link up with the Weasleys first and discuss things, but I'd say there's a pretty good chance you'll be out of here by the end of the week." said Deanna calmly, returning her attention to the walls.

Harry felt his heart leap at the thought of being free. "Thank you! You two are something else, you know that?"

"We know." Deanna said absently. Harry noticed Aunt Petunia still standing there, keys dangling from one hand, eyes staring out of the window.

"What did you do to her?" he asked in astonishment. Deanna grinned at Luella, who coughed nervously.

"Probably best you don't know." Luella said delicately. "Don't worry, she'll be fine, and she won't remember a thing. Harry, you look starving, fancy some lunch? I'll fix you up with something to eat while Sherlock here gets on with her work." She indicated for Harry to follow her. Harry did so, his mood greatly improved.

It was several hours later that the two girls left the house. Harry had been re-imprisoned in his bedroom, after being given a good lunch, a brief spell in the garden sunbathing and a good shower. Petunia Dursley was sitting in the lounge, coming out of her trance with no memory of anything that had happened. And Deanna and Luella were heading purposefully back to Luella's house with a whole heap of notes covering just about everything anyone could ever need to know about Number Four Privet Drive and its inhabitants.

"That went rather well, don't you think Lu?" Deanna grinned.

"Absolutely, Dee. The Twin Avengers strike again! Now what?"

Deanna patted her notepad. "We go back to yours, then we get on your computer and type all this up into something intelligible. When we're done, we ring Marlie and tell her the good news, then fax the whole thing over to her. She does have a fax machine, doesn't she?"

"I think so. Her mum's got all sorts of Muggle contacts, she needs to keep in touch. I'm sure Marlie gave me the number. Excellent. We can have this done by teatime, and Marlie can owl it all to the Weasleys by tonight." Luella grinned. "Did we tell Harry he'd be free by the end of the week? If I know the twins, they'll have him out of there by tomorrow."

"Devious as Slytherins, those two." remarked Deanna. "And they've enough Gryffindor courage to follow through with all their crazy plans. Aren't you glad they're mates of ours?"

Luella nodded. "Very glad indeed, I'd hate to be their enemies. Come on, we're nearly here. Let's get started."

Sure enough, the whole report had been faxed to an amazed Marlie by six o'clock that evening ("a fourteen page Word document? With a scanned in street plan and an Ordnance Survey map? You two don't do things by half, do you?") and Luella and Deanna had retired to their separate beds in their separate homes very satisfied with the day's events.

However, that night, Luella found herself awake and thirsty. Sneaking quietly downstairs to get a glass of water, she idly glanced out of the window. And saw what looked like a flying car go past. She rubbed her eyes, blinking. Was she dreaming still? She looked again. It was still there and heading in the direction of Privet Drive. And now that she looked, she could see three figures in the car, and the streetlights reflecting off their heads made it look as if their hair had a definite reddish tinge to it. She grinned to herself. Looked like the twins were moving in to action all right.

A phone call to Marlie a few days later confirmed it.

"Yeah, the plan worked perfectly. Fred and George borrowed their dad's specially engineered flying car, used your directions to get to Privet Drive, and busted Harry out. They said to say thank you to you guys, by the way. Your information was most helpful. I still cannot believe you drew a scale drawing of the house layout, by the way. And measuring the thickness of the walls? You guys scare me." Marlie sounded concerned.

"Deanna did all the note-taking, not me!" Luella grinned. "She's very thorough when she wants to be."

"Thorough? Obsessive is the word I was thinking of. Do you have any idea how detailed that report was??"

"Of course I do, I was the one stuck with typing it. And scanning in the drawings, and the maps, and putting it all together so it looked pretty. I'm telling you, Deanna sure knows how to delegate. If she put that much effort into her schoolwork, she'd never get a D again. So how is Harry, anyway?"

"He's fine. Mrs. Weasley is feeding him up nicely. I'm going over there myself later to check on him in person, have a Quidditch session with the boys, that sort of thing, so I'll let you know. Oh, what are you doing next Wednesday?"

"Nothing. Why?" Luella asked curiously.

"We're all going to Diagon Alley to get our school stuff. You and DT are welcome to come along. In fact, I'd love you to, because otherwise it's just me and the Weasleys. I'd feel outnumbered by all those Gryffindors."

"OK, count us in. I could do with the trip out. So, Marlie. What do you know about this Gilderoy Lockhart character then? Because my book list has just arrived and it seems to consist of his entire works."

Marlie's usual Slytherin composure abandoned her completely. "Gilderoy Lockhart! Oh, he's such a fantastic wizard! A real celeb! He's done all sorts of cool things, taking out banshees, vampires and ghouls! We're going to learn so much from those books, I can just tell." Marlie was practically gushing, and although Luella couldn't see her, she could have sworn that Marlie was going red.

"Well, if you say so, although Deanna's never mentioned him and I'm sure she would have if he'd been that good." Deanna, having been raised by one of the country's top Aurors, had devoured tales of fighters of the Dark Arts where other children had watched Disney films.

"Oh, what does she know?" Marlie said carelessly. "All her books are about people who lived over a hundred years ago. All very fascinating I'm sure, but hardly relevant to this day and age is it? Lockhart's part of the here and now! A Dark Arts fighter for the 20th Century, don't you know! And sooo handsome!"

"Handsome, is he?" Luella grinned. "That explains a lot."

"Lu!" Marlie snapped. "Behave. Now, are you coming along on Wednesday or not?"

"Yes, yes, count me in." Luella told her. "We'll be there."

"And where has she got to now?" inquired Deanna, more than a little irritated. It was now Wednesday and the two girls were standing in the lobby of Gringotts bank, waiting for Marlie Lovegood and Rianne Stormosi to turn up.

"They'll turn up." said Luella calmly. "Rianne's pretty punctual and it's unlikely that Marlie'll want to waste any time getting her hands on those Lockhart books."

"Or indeed the author." remarked Deanna dryly. "Apparently Lockhart's quite the stud."

"So Marlie said. Reckon she fancies him, Dee?"

"Marlie fancies anything remotely male. Fussy she is not." Deanna indicated the book list again. "Our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher must be the same way inclined. Funny though, Mum doesn't have any of these, and she's got most of the textbooks on that subject. I hope Lockhart knows what he's talking about."

"What did your mum say when she saw the booklist? Has she read any of them?" Luella asked with interest.

"That's the weird thing. She didn't say anything, just rolled her eyes, laughed, and told me I'd better take a few books from her collection as well. And when I asked if Auntie

Mel used any Lockhart books on the Auror training programme, she seemed to think the idea was hilarious." Deanna said thoughtfully. "You know, I'm not at all sure she thinks much of him."

Luella was about to reply, when she heard a voice shouting her name. She turned to see a young girl with lots of bushy brown hair running across the bank towards them, followed by two rather nervous looking adults who Luella guessed must be her parents.

"Hermione!" Luella smiled as the girl propelled herself into Luella's arms. "Are you here to get your school things as well?"

"Oh yes. We're meeting up with Harry and the Weasleys later. Oh, these are my parents by the way. Mum, Dad, this is Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. They're friends of mine from school."

"So you're Luella!" Mrs. Granger smiled. "Hermione's told us so much about you! How are you doing at school?"

"Very well, thank you." Luella replied. "I'm studying for my OWLS at the moment." "Decided what you're going to do with all this knowledge yet?" Mr. Granger asked. "Hermione's got it all worked out already. Going to be an Author."

"Auror, Dad!" Hermione said, going red. "They hunt down Dark Mages."

The Grangers exchanged indulgent looks. "That's our Hermione, knows it all." Mr. Granger said, grinning fondly. Hermione squirmed, embarrassed.

"Stop it Dad, you're embarrassing me!"

"Oh Doug, leave her alone." Mrs. Granger said. "Now, Hermione, where do we go to change our money?"

Hermione looked a little confused. "Oh, er, I'm not really sure. Either of you two know?"

Deanna smiled and pointed them in the right direction. "That queue over there. Try not to let the goblins put you off. They're pretty honest, they do have a reputation to protect after all."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger thanked her and joined the queue. Hermione lingered to chat.

"I'm so sorry about them! My Dad's always getting stuff wrong about magical things. I think he does it deliberately just to annoy me sometimes."

"Ah, forget it Herm. Parents are always like that. They have no purpose other than to embarrass their children. This is why I leave mine at home." Luella reassured her.

"I don't suppose you've seen Stormer and Lovegood on your travels have you?" Deanna asked. "Only we're meant to be meeting them here."

Hermione shook her head. "No. Don't suppose you've seen the Weasleys or Harry, have you?"

"Not seen Harry since we went round his house last week." Deanna told her. "So, I take it he is safely with the Weasleys then?"

"Yes, Ron told me all about their rescue operation." Hermione said disapprovingly. "Honestly, stealing Mr. Weasley's car like that!" She looked up sharply. "You two went round there?"

"Who do you think did the reconnaissance?" Deanna said idly. "Yeah, me and Lu went round there after Marlie told us no one had heard from him in a while. And after we'd told Marlie what was up, she sent word to Fred and George who had him out of there that very night."

Hermione was impressed. "You spoke to him? But wasn't he locked in his room? How did you persuade his aunt and uncle to let you in?"

Deanna and Luella exchanged looks. Deanna was grinning, while Luella shifted uncomfortably.

"Er, natural charm." Luella said hastily.

"Yes, our Lu's very persuasive when she wants to be." grinned Deanna. She looked up as someone walked past the open doorway. Someone so big, the shadow completely cut off the light.

Hermione recognised the figure immediately. "Hagrid!" she squealed, running out of the bank. Then she saw the small boy standing next to him. "Harry! Harry, over here!" Racing down the flight of stairs at the entrance, she rushed over to Harry and hugged him. Deanna and Luella followed her.

"Harry, how are you? What happened to your glasses?" Hermione was asking in surprise. "Oh, hello Hagrid." She turned back to Harry who, Luella noticed, was covered in soot and whose glasses were shattered.

Deanna had also noticed. "Potter, what happened to you? You look like you've had a nasty accident with a coal-hole."

"Close." Harry said. "I got lost on the Floo network and ended up in the wrong place."

Deanna grinned. "Oh yeah? Where'd you end up? I remember when Luella tried using the Floo network for the first time. Now that was fun. She was aiming for Lovegood Farm, that's Marlie's place, and... well, I won't say where she came out at, but suffice it to say she discovered a whole load of alternative uses for a pair of handcuffs and a tub of melted chocolate. Man alive, the trouble Mum got into over that. You should have heard the comments her colleagues were making afterwards."

Luella wished the ground would swallow her up. "Deanna, shut up! It wasn't my fault the stupid Floo network mistook Lovegood Farm for Lovecraft Adult Supplies."

Anyway, Harry, where did you find yourself?" she asked, desperately trying to divert the attention from herself.

"Knockturn Alley." Harry said quietly. Deanna stopped sniggering immediately.

"*Knockturn Alley??*" she said in a stunned whisper. "My god Harry, are you all right?" She was staring at him, a horrified look in her eyes. Luella shot a glance at Hermione who looked as confused as she was.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Hagrid found me." Harry reassured her.

"Well, thank Hecate you did! Knockturn Alley, my god, my god." Deanna was whispering, trembling with fear.

"It's all righ' now, Deanna." Hagrid said cheerfully. "Found 'im just in time. Ah were there fer some Flesh-Eatin' Slug Repellent and ran inter 'im just outside Borgin an' Burkes in a righ' old state. Yeh shoulda seen 'im before ah cleaned 'im up, he looked a righ' mess. Yeh won' be goin' there again in a hurry, will yeh now, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. Deanna seemed to have recovered but was still looking pale.

"I should hope not! Knockturn Alley, my god, anything could have happened!" She shuddered.

"But Hagrid, what *is* Knockturn Alley?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"A place yeh don' wanna be." Hagrid said firmly.

"It's where all the really dodgy Dark Arts stuff is sold." Deanna said quietly. "You get a lot of strange people hanging around there, it's really dangerous. You'd have to be an Auror or an Dark Mage to come out of there unscathed. Mum took me there once."

"Your *mum??*" Hermione gasped. "But she's an Auror! Why would she take you there?"

"Because I asked." Deanna said miserably. "In fact, every time we went to Diagon Alley, I always begged her to take me there. You know how kids are, always whining to their parents about things. Well, that was me. I was curious about what was kept there, wanted to see it more closely, wanted to know why everyone else kept their heads down and pretended it wasn't there. Eventually Mum got so sick of my whining, she took me down there and showed me exactly why. After about ten minutes, I was screaming, crying, begging for her to take me home. I was only six. I've never been so scared in all my life. And I've never wanted to go back." Deanna shivered, despite the warmth of the sun. "Dear Gaia, not for all the gold in Gringotts would I go back there. I had nightmares for weeks!"

They were interrupted by the Weasleys running towards them.

"Harry, there you are!" Ron gasped as he staggered up to them. "We thought we'd lost you!"

Mr. Weasley was next on the scene. "We hoped you'd only gone one grate too far... Molly's on her way now... worried sick, we were!"

Mrs. Weasley was next to arrive, dragging her daughter Ginny behind her. "Oh Harry - oh my dear - you could have been anywhere - are you all right?" She let go of Ginny and swept him into a hug.

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked curiously.

"Knockturn Alley." Hagrid said firmly.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley reacted in much the same way Deanna had.

"Knockturn Alley?" they gasped. Mrs. Weasley immediately swept Harry into another hug. "Oh my dear! Hagrid, if you hadn't found him!"

Fred and George were in awe. "Knockturn Alley? Brilliant!"

"It is not brilliant!" Deanna snapped. "It's the dodgiest place in London!"

Both twins turned to look at her in surprise. "You're surely not scared, are you Tyler?" Fred asked.

"Yeah, I'd've thought with your background, you'd be well up for going there." George remarked.

"I have been there." Deanna said shortly. "I'm not going back."

"Been where?" came a girl's voice. Luella turned to look. Rianne had just turned up, with Marlie trailing behind her at her usual leisurely pace. Marlie did not believe in wasting energy unnecessarily.

"Harry took a wrong turning on the Floo and ended up in Knockturn Alley." Luella told Rianne.

"Knockturn Alley, you're kidding!" Rianne gasped. "What was it like, we've never been allowed anywhere near it!"

"Not you too." Deanna snapped. "Ri, it's a haven for Dark Mages, Dark creatures and all sorts of things best not mentioned. Trust me, if you did go in, you wouldn't want to stay!"

"When did you go to Knockturn Alley?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "I'm amazed your mother let you, mine certainly wouldn't."

"Mine not only let me, she took me there herself, showed me round, let me look at all the stuff on show and explained in great detail exactly how they obtained it all and what it was all used for." Deanna shivered. "Put me off for life. Which was probably the idea, but still..."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were giving her pitying looks. "You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter, aren't you?" Mr. Weasley said kindly.

"Yes." Deanna said warily. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged sympathetic glances.

"How is your mother?" Mr. Weasley asked gently. "It's been a while since we heard from her, always did keep herself to herself. Everything all right at home?"

"Yes, things are fine." Deanna said, giving slightly concerned looks to her friends.

"Well, if things ever get too much for you, or if you need to talk, you know you're quite welcome to visit us whenever you want." Mrs. Weasley said, in that same strangely kind, pitying voice.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Deanna said, looking rather uncomfortable. Luella swiftly decided to rescue her friend.

"Hermione, your parents must have finished changing their money by now." Luella said brightly. "Shall we go in, check up on them? I expect everyone else needs to get money out too."

Harry caught on immediately. "Yes, I really need to get some Galleons in my purse. Let's go!"

And with that, they all said goodbye to Hagrid and filed into Gringotts. Deanna and Luella, having already stocked up on magical cash, decided to wait outside in the sunshine for them. Luella sat down on the steps and waited for Deanna to start talking. Which, after flinging herself down to sit next to her friend, she did.

"I hate that so much!" she said through gritted teeth. "I mean, I know they meant well, but I am really, really, *really* fed up with people just *assuming* that just because there's only me and Mum at home that I am some kind of forlorn little waif who needs constant love and affection. See, Lu, this is why I like your parents, they treat me normally, although your mum does overfeed me whenever I'm over there."

"Which I've never ever seen you turn down." observed Luella. Deanna grinned.

"Well, she is such a good cook, I can hardly refuse, can I? Unlike my mother who could probably burn water." Deanna fell quiet and gazed into the distance, all sorts of unspoken thoughts crossing her mind. At length, she spoke. "I'll tell you who else treats me normally. Snapey."

"Snape?" Luella raised an eyebrow. "You're not telling me you actually like him? I thought you couldn't stand him."

Deanna shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I don't. I mean, I didn't. But I don't know. I know he's a slimy bastard and all, but... in his own twisted way, he's been pretty good to me. He was there for me when I was spying on Crabbe for us. He was there after I found out my dad was a Death Eater. And he gave me Nestrá." Deanna smiled wistfully. Clytemnestra the peregrine falcon had been a gift from Snape to replace her

previous owl, which had died after an altercation with Malfoy. Nesta, as Deanna called the bird, had more than made up for the loss, with Deanna proclaiming her as the coolest present she'd ever been given. She turned sharply to Luella. "He's not so bad really, is he?"

"You're easily bribed, aren't you? Let's hope the future of humanity never rests on you having to resist the offer of a peregrine falcon from Voldie." Luella grinned.

Deanna laughed. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. It's just that... Snape cares but doesn't embarrass any of us by actually showing it. I like that, you know? Then there's the way he always comes up with the best lines. Gods damn it, to be able to always have the best put-downs at the ready...! Malfoy would be in fear of his life, or at least his ego, which in his case amounts to pretty much the same thing."

"Deanna, you always do have the perfect put-down ready." Luella pointed out. "Anyone would think you'd been taking lessons from him."

"Ah, you flatter me. But it's not just sarcasm! He just is cool. I mean, I could sit and talk to him for hours, you know. I bet he's had a fascinating life."

Luella smiled. Yes, Deanna was probably right. She remembered a chance remark of Professor Snape's last year. "I've seen things all right. Don't know if you could call it living though. More like surviving." She felt her spine tingle as she recalled that encounter in his office. Snape healing a cut on her face then gently wiping the blood off her fingers, those deep black eyes gazing into hers. She quickly banished the thought from her mind.

"Fascinating is one word. Scary and dangerous are others. He lived during the Voldemort Years, Dee. Hardly a walk in the park."

"I'd still love to hear about it though." Deanna said wistfully. She blushed suddenly.

"What?" Luella asked, curious. "What is it?"

"You'll probably laugh at me for this." she said shyly.

"No I won't." Luella said gently. "Come on, tell me."

"Well, it's just that... no I can't tell you. It's just too embarrassing."

"What could be so bad? You don't fancy him, do you?" Luella asked, beginning to grin.

"No!" Deanna snapped. "But, well... You know I don't have a dad?"

"Yes."

"Well..." Deanna blushed fiercely. "This is really embarrassing. Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"Promise!"

"Not even Ri and Marlie? In fact, come to think of it, especially not Ri and Marlie."

"I swear it. Come on, tell me." Luella was deeply curious by now.

"Well... all right then." Deanna leaned closer. "You know I don't have a dad?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I could choose someone, if I could have anyone in the world as my father..." She paused, gazing into the distance. "I'd choose Snape." She dropped her eyes suddenly, blushing again. "Told you it was embarrassing! Look, let's drop it. Forget I said anything."

Luella felt a chill go through her. Deanna was closer to the truth than she'd ever imagined. For Professor Snape was indeed her father. However, Deanna was unaware of this, primarily because Snape had managed to ruin Caitlin Tyler's life in the process and really screw up Deanna's childhood. While Luella didn't particularly bear any grudge against Snape for that, she was all too aware that Deanna most certainly would, and it would be all the more painful if Deanna got close to him.

"What brought all this on?" Luella asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "This time last year, you couldn't stand him."

Deanna smiled gently. "You know how when I found out about my dad, I went to Snape to ask if he knew who he was?"

"I remember. Why?"

A look of nostalgia settled on Deanna's face. "He asked me why I wanted to know. And I told him. Told him what the bastard had done to Mum and me, how he'd wrecked her life and robbed me of a normal childhood. You know what Snapey did?"

"What?" Luella asked curiously.

"He listened." Deanna said quietly. "And comforted me. I ended up crying on his shoulder, telling him things I'd never told anyone before. No one's ever done that before, not an adult anyway. I don't think I've ever felt so protected, so safe. So..." Deanna hesitated. "So loved." she said quietly.

Luella felt a pang of jealousy stab at her. The thought of inventing a sob-story of her own and going to Snape with it flitted briefly across her mind before reason prevailed. Stop it, he's a teacher, she told herself.

Deanna was speaking again, chin resting on her knees, eyes staring into space. "Right there and then, I realised what I'd missed out on all my life. And since then, I've been imagining what it would have been like if he and Mum had brought me up. Just picturing me and him doing all these little father-daughter bonding things. Dear gods, it's all I can think of these days, making him care about me, making him proud of me.

I want it so badly, and yet he's not my father, it'll never happen. It hurts, Lu. It really hurts." She buried her face in her hands. Luella reached out to comfort her, the feeling of wanting something out of reach all too familiar. At the same time, Luella was aware of this growing sense of fear for her friend. Too late to try and keep Deanna from getting too close to Snape. It looked horribly like she was already in far too deep. Luella didn't know the details of how Deanna had been fathered, not for certain, but she was now absolutely sure that it would destroy Deanna to find out.

"Deanna." she whispered. "Deanna, it's OK." Deanna looked up, eyes glittering.

"I keep imagining him and Mum falling in love, you know?" she said quietly. "The two of them getting married, and him moving in at home. It'd be so cool, Lu. Having him as a stepfather'll do, if nothing else. Don't think it'll happen though."

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Deanna, last time anyone suggested Snape might be sleeping with your mother, you raced straight over to his office to kill him."

"That was different!" Deanna said dismissively. "The way Malfoy put it, it sounded like they were having some seedy affair, like he was just lusting after her. I'm not putting up with anyone screwing my mother like she's some kind of tart. She deserves better. But if they were in love, really in love..." She turned to Luella, eyes burning. "If they were happy together, I wouldn't stand in their way. In fact, not only would I not stand in their way, I'd be bridesmaid at the wedding and do it gladly, even though I hate wearing dresses. If it meant I'd get a normal family, at long last."

Luella didn't get a chance to reply. Marlie came bounding out of the bank, moneybags in hand, with Rianne following.

"All right, are you two finished? Well, I've money to spend and this is a fine day for spending it. Let's hit the shops!"

An hour later, the four girls arrived at Flourish and Blotts. Harry, Ron and Hermione were already there, trying to get in. This was by no means as easy as they might have expected, for there was a vast crowd, composed mostly of middle-aged witches, all fighting to get in as well.

"What's going on here?" Deanna asked in surprise. "Is Tom Jones making a guest appearance or something?"

"Close." Harry told her. He pointed to a banner stretched across the building, proclaiming "*GILDEROY LOCKHART will be signing copies of his autobiography MAGICAL ME today 12.30pm - 4.30pm*"

"Gilderoy Lockhart!" Marlie and Hermione squealed in unison.

"We can actually meet him!" cried Hermione. Marlie whipped out a mirror and began frantically adjusting her hair.

"Oh my god, I look such a mess!" she said, examining her face in panic. "If only I'd known, I'd have put some make-up on or something."

"Stop fussing." Rianne told her. "You look fine."

"I do not!" Marlie shrieked. "I look hideous, and I swear I've got the beginnings of a spot coming through."

"Lovegood, you don't fancy him, do you?" Deanna asked, beginning to grin. Marlie blushed crimson.

"No." she said unconvincingly. "I just want to look my best, that's all."

"Marlie, you've got more admirers than anyone else in the school with the exception of your older brother." Luella said. "I wouldn't worry! Come on, the crowd's thinning out a bit. Shall we go in?"

The seven of them somehow managed to fight their way into the shop. The queue for book signings wove its way twice round the store and back. Deanna immediately grabbed a basket and a copy of all the Lockhart books on the list.

"Going to get them signed, Tyler?" Ron asked in surprise. "Never had you down as a Lockhart fan. Looks can be so deceiving!"

Deanna gave him a look that could freeze lava. "I'm going to get them signed so I can sell them on for double the money to next year's first years. Do you have a problem with that, Weasley?"

"No, Tyler." Ron said hastily. He decided to change the subject. "Hey, there's Mum and Dad over there. Let's queuejump."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin." Rianne commented, as she ducked under the barriers. The others followed.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were standing near the front, their daughter Ginny next to them.

"Is that him, Mum?" Ginny was bouncing up and down with excitement. "Is it? Is that Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Weasley said rather distractedly, fiddling nervously with her robes and patting her hair. "Ginny, do be quiet, you don't want to put him off, do you?"

Ginny did shut up, but not because of anything her mother had said. Her eyes had fallen on Harry, and she was now hiding behind her father, blushing furiously. Mr. Weasley greeted the children with a smile.

"Hello there. Come to get your books signed too?"

Hermione and Marlie both nodded breathlessly. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, standing next to the Weasleys, nodded knowingly.

"Hermione's quite the little Lockhart fan, aren't you Hermione?" Mr. Granger said genially.

"Yes, ever since we got the book list, it's been Lockhart this and Lockhart that." Hermione's mother smiled warmly. "Apparently he's quite the celebrity."

"He's amazing!" breathed Marlie. "His books are so exciting, I've read them already, he really knows his stuff! Far more interesting than those dusty old tomes of my mother's."

"Marlie's mother runs the Department of Dark Arts Eradication." Mr. Weasley explained. "So Marlie knows what she's talking about."

"My mum doesn't seem to think much of Lockhart." Deanna chipped in. "I think she thinks he's sold out."

"Blimey." Ron said in surprise. "I never thought I'd have something in common with Tyler's mother."

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to tell her son off when the queue moved forward, bringing them straight into Lockhart's line of vision. He glanced up. And saw Harry, who just at that moment was idly scratching his forehead, scar fully visible.

Lockhart shot to his feet. "It can't be Harry Potter!" he cried in delight. Harry immediately cringed and tried to hide behind Mrs. Weasley. Too late. Lockhart had already dived in to the crowd and was dragging Harry forward. Luella noticed Harry's face burning red as he stared firmly at the ground while Lockhart flung his arm around him, posing for the *Daily Prophet* photographer who was even now taking pictures of them. Poor thing, Luella thought. All of a sudden, she felt extremely glad her own destiny was the closely guarded secret it was.

"Rather him than me." Luella heard Deanna murmuring quietly. "Poor sod." Next to her, Rianne nodded in agreement.

"I'd hate that." Marlie however, looked less sorry.

"The lucky thing!" she whispered. "The lucky, lucky thing! Oh, what I wouldn't give!"

Lockhart motioned for quiet. "Ladies and gentlemen! What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time! When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography - which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge - he had no *idea* that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book *Magical Me*. He and his school fellows will in fact be getting the real magical me! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing

that, this September, I will be taking up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The crowd cheered wildly as Harry found himself being presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Sweet Mother Demeter, you *are* joking, aren't you?" Luella heard Deanna say quietly.

"This'll be a fun year." Rianne said sarcastically. "Medea's ringlets, Tyler, you'd better get your mother's entire library sent up to school if he's going to be teaching us."

"What's up with you two?" Marlie snapped. "I'm sure he'll be a fine teacher! I mean, his books are so cool and well-written, how can we not learn anything from him?"

Rianne laughed derisively. "I doubt that. From what I can see, he appears to be all words and no action. Full of false joviality and camaraderie that vanishes as soon as you actually need him for anything. Much like my father really. I bet Lockhart was a Gryffindor too."

"Gryffindors do not act all friendly and bugger off when the chips are down!" Ron yelled.

"I never said you all did." Rianne said patiently. "But my father is the type to do that and he was a Gryffindor. And Lockhart strikes me as the same type of person. That's all, Weasley!"

Ron was not convinced but did not press the point. Deanna glanced over towards Harry and immediately took Luella's arm.

"What is it?" Luella asked in surprise. Deanna's face had set in the firm expression that usually indicated trouble.

"There." she said grimly. Luella looked. Harry was giving his Lockhart books to a trembling Ginny. However, that wasn't what had attracted Deanna's attention. Making his way towards Harry was a blond boy they recognised all too well from school. Draco Malfoy.

"All right then." Luella heard herself saying. "Twin Avengers in to action." Diving smoothly through the crowds, she made her way over, Deanna hard on her heels.

Ron and Hermione had also noticed and had fought their way over. Luella arrived just in time to hear Ron saying "Bet you're surprised to see Harry here, eh?"

"Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley." Draco drawled. "I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for that lot."

Ron dropped his Lockhart books into Ginny's cauldron and went for Malfoy, prevented only by Harry and Hermione grabbing his jacket in a manoeuvre Luella recognised all too well from having to stop Deanna doing much the same thing.

Deanna stepped in. "What's this I see?" she raised an eyebrow. "Draco Malfoy in a shop? What happened, Malfoy? Servants on strike were they?"

Draco sneered back at her. "At least my family have servants, Tyler. At least I have a family."

Deanna glared at him, but did not retaliate. Calming down, she grinned evilly and stepped forward, their noses almost meeting.

"My ancestors could beat yours in a fight any day, Malfoy. I didn't get my name because they paved roofs for a living." She smiled sweetly. "Tal-y-Rhys, Malfoy. Remember that name. Your father will explain its significance, I'm sure." She backed away again. "Now leave Harry Potter alone."

Draco looked shaken, but the scowl did not leave his face. "Don't threaten me Tyler. Your ancestors aren't here now, are they?"

"No. But I am." Luella said quietly. She gestured in front of his face. "Leave now." she said, eyes boring in to his. "Leave and don't threaten us again!"

Draco's eyes widened in fear and he took a few steps backwards, trembling. He would have turned and run altogether had another wizard not arrived, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Luella recognised him immediately. She'd never met him before, but the resemblance to Draco said it all. Lucius Malfoy. He didn't say anything, just let his cold grey eyes travel over them. They stopped to linger on her, and his sneer deepened. Luella didn't know exactly what he was thinking, but she suspected the words "Mudblood" and "disgrace to Slytherin" figured strongly in there somewhere. She just hoped he didn't recognise Glamour when he saw it used, or questions would surely be asked about why a common Muggle-born had a gift found only in pureblood families.

Mr. Weasley, followed by the twins, Rianne and Marlie had by this time fought his way over.

"Ron, what are you doing? It's mad in here, let's go outside once you've got your books..." His voice trailed off as he saw Lucius Malfoy. Mr. Malfoy sneered at him.

"Well, well, well. Arthur Weasley."

"Lucius." Mr. Weasley said coldly.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear. All those raids - I hope they're paying you overtime." Mr. Malfoy sneered unpleasantly. He reached into Ginny's cauldron and came up with a battered Transfiguration textbook. "Obviously not. What's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley had gone a far darker shade of red than any of his children had. Luella felt a tug on her arm. Deanna was trying to drag her away.

"Better watch it, Lu, I think there's a fight brewing here. Best place for us is out of it." Luella did as her friend said and moved away.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy." Mr. Weasley said threateningly.

"Clearly." said Mr. Malfoy, eyes passing coolly over Luella and the Grangers, who were standing behind her, watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley... and I thought your family could sink no lower-"

Mr. Weasley's self-control deserted him, as he launched himself at Mr. Malfoy, sending him backwards into a bookshelf. Books went flying everywhere as the two men grappled with each other.

"Get him Dad!" the twins were yelling. Marlie was also getting quite enthusiastic, cheering on Mr. Weasley for all she was worth. Mrs. Weasley, by contrast, looked quite horrified, screaming at her husband to leave him. As were the shop assistants, all trying to separate them without actually intervening too closely.

Then another voice cut through the melee. "Break it up there, gents, break it up." A flash of magic lit the shop up as someone fired a charm into the air, causing everyone to fall silent. Hagrid pushed his way through the crowd and pulled the two wizards apart. And right behind him was a blonde witch who Deanna and Luella had no trouble recognising.

"Mum!" gasped Deanna. "What are you doing here?"

Caitlin Tyler surveyed the chaos, her eyes blazing. "I came to see how you and Luella were getting on. Got rather bored at home, to tell you the truth." She turned to Arthur Weasley, who was nursing a cut lip. "Arthur, what on earth do you think you're doing? Starting a fight in the middle of Flourish and Blotts, in front of your own children, not to mention mine, what on earth possessed you?" She noticed Lucius Malfoy getting to his feet. "Oh. I see. As you were then, Arthur."

"Well, well, well." Mr. Malfoy said mockingly. "Caitlin Tyler, no less. We meet again. Come now, why look at me like that? You weren't nearly so unfriendly last time we met."

Luella guessed instantly what Mr. Malfoy was referring to - Caitlin Tyler's abduction and torture by Death Eaters way back in the Voldemort Years. Caitlin fingered her wand furiously, but did not lose her temper.

"Why, Lucius." she said casually. "What could you possibly be referring to there? Care to divulge the details? If it's privacy you're after, there's some lovely little maximum security cells back at the DDAE. I'm sure we could arrange for one if there's something you were going to tell me."

Mr. Malfoy didn't answer her, just glared. Instead, he turned on Ginny Weasley, thrusting her Transfiguration book back in to her hands.

"Here, girl - take your book - it's the best your father can give you." He wormed his way out of Hagrid's grip, took Draco by the hand and swept out of the shop. Hagrid and Caitlin turned back to Mr. Weasley.

"Are you all right, Arthur?" Caitlin asked him. Mr. Weasley nodded.

"I'll be fine. Oh, that Lucius Malfoy, I would dearly like to see him get what's coming to him one of these days..."

"As would I, Arthur." Caitlin said darkly. "As would I."

Mrs. Weasley was near hysterics. "Arthur, what on earth were you thinking of, brawling in public like that? What must everyone think of us, Gilderoy Lockhart must think we're the worst kind of family, and in front of your own children too! Caitlin's got every right to arrest you now for breaching the peace like that, and I wouldn't be at all surprised!"

Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "For landing a punch on Lucius Malfoy, I'd be more inclined to give him a medal. Relax, Molly, I've no intention of arresting your husband. I can't say I would have done any differently."

Hagrid straightened Mr. Weasley's robes. "Yeh should've ignored 'im, Arthur. Yeh know what he's like, they're all rotten ter the core, that family. Yeh didn't see Caitlin 'ere reaching for 'er wand and that's some achievement on 'er part, I can tell yeh."

Caitlin grinned. Her somewhat volatile temper was considered legendary by all who knew her. "Hagrid, it was a very close run thing!" she smiled. She surveyed the shop lazily. "I suppose we'd better clear this place up before Belladonna Flourish comes out here demanding to know what we've done to her shop. *Restoratio!*" She cast charms at the fallen bookshelves, causing them to right themselves, and the books to fly back on to the shelves. The crowd fell back in silence, no one daring to get in the way of the infamous Caitlin Tyler. With the mess eventually cleared up, and the Grangers, Weasleys, Harry and Hagrid leaving the store, saying their goodbyes to Caitlin and the four girls, Caitlin turned to her daughter and her friends.

"So what on earth was that all about, then?" she asked, good-naturedly.

"Draco was picking on Harry." Deanna said simply. "So we stepped in. Then Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley stepped in, and Mr. Malfoy taunted Mr. Weasley into hitting him."

"Why am I not surprised?" Caitlin sighed. She suddenly noticed a *Daily Prophet* reporter hovering nearby with a notepad and quill, clearly dying to ask her some questions. "Do you want something, sir?" she asked coldly.

"Er... I was just wondering how you were feeling about having to break up a fight in the middle of Flourish and Blotts and what your opinion on Mr. Malfoy is..." His voice trailed off under the look Caitlin was giving him.

"Go away, you annoying little man." she said softly. She intensified her gaze. "Go away and forget that little fight ever happened." she said soothingly. "Just forget you ever saw it. If anyone mentions it again, you won't know what they're talking about. You certainly won't remember that I or my daughter were ever here."

The reporter went into a trance and turned, walking away. As he crossed the room, he shook himself and headed for Lockhart, looking bemused. Lockhart lost no time in flagging down the reporter. "I say, old chap, any chance of working that little confrontation into the story somehow? 'Beautiful Auror heroically breaks up fight between two old rivals' sort of thing?"

The reporter looked at Lockhart as if he'd gone mad. "You what, squire?" Lockhart blinked, shrugged, and turned towards Caitlin, grinning from ear to ear. Caitlin noticed him coming in her direction and groaned under her breath.

"Caitlin Tyler!" Lockhart grinned, striding over to her and putting his arm round her, blissfully unaware of Caitlin's smile going rigid and her eyes silently commanding him to drop dead on the spot.

"Gilderoy." she said through gritted teeth.

Lockhart grinned delightedly and kissed her on the cheek, much to Deanna's horror. Caitlin's eyes widened in shock before narrowing to a look any normal man would have run from in fear of his life.

"Still as pretty as ever!" Lockhart laughed. "Well, fancy seeing you here. Here for the book signing, were you?"

"No." Caitlin said shortly. "I was looking for my daughter."

Lockhart started, before turning to the four girls. He immediately singled out a horrified Deanna. "And what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked her in saccharine tones.

"Considerably richer than you." Deanna said stonily. Lockhart just laughed and squeezed her cheek.

"She's as witty as her mother and no mistake." he smiled indulgently. "So, still fighting the Dark Forces then?"

"I'm still at the DDAE." Caitlin said coldly.

"Excellent, excellent. You know, if you ever need a hand bringing those villains to justice, just give me a call. I'm always available if you need any assistance. In fact, if you're a little short staffed, I've got a few weeks free, I'm quite willing to step in and give you all a hand..."

"NO!" Caitlin shouted. She swiftly recovered herself. "I mean, no thank you, Gilderoy, we're quite all right at the moment, thank you for the offer."

"Well, if you're sure. I had better let you ladies get back to your shopping then." Lockhart grinned, his teeth gleaming. "No doubt you're all looking for the latest fashions and make-up, so I shall let you all continue in your quest for beauty, not that any of you need it." he flashed them all another grin, which only Marlie returned. Bidding farewell to Caitlin, he sauntered off. Caitlin breathed a sigh of relief as he left.

"Dear gods, the two most annoying people on the planet and I have the misfortune to run into both of them on the same day!" she sighed. "And most amazing of all, no one's been injured yet. I must be losing my touch."

"Did you know him, then?" Deanna asked curiously. Caitlin nodded.

"Two years above me at school. Friends with your father, Rianne. A Gryffindor."

"I thought so!" Rianne laughed. "They just seem to have the same inability to read anyone else's body language, and don't really know when to stop."

"Rianne, I think you've just summed him up nicely." Caitlin laughed. "He worked at the DDAE briefly too. He was the most incompetent Auror I've ever seen, what on earth Barty was thinking of, hiring him, I don't know. We were desperate for recruits, that's the only reason I can think of. In the end, we managed to convince him that he was needed far more desperately by these peasants in Bulgaria whose village was being terrorised by a vampire, and we never saw him again. For which we were all truly thankful."

"He's going to be our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher." Luella said.

"He's WHAT? You're *joking*!" Caitlin gasped. She clutched her head in her hands, almost pulling her hair out. "Oh my word, Mel is going to go ballistic when she hears this! You mean the next generation of Aurors is going to be taught by him?" She turned on her heels, and took Deanna and Luella by the hand, heading for the Anti-Dark Arts section of the shop. "Right, you four. Come with me. I'm personally buying you some proper Defence Against the Dark Arts textbooks. I'm not having your education suffer because of him."

As she began going through Flourish and Blott's shelves, flinging textbooks into a basket held by a highly unwilling Deanna, Caitlin could only wonder what on earth Dumbledore was thinking of, hiring the man. Lockhart had been a fool at Hogwarts, and didn't appear to have changed. However, another thought swiftly occurred to her, which caused a sly grin to spread across her features. If Lockhart was going to be working at Hogwarts, that meant he'd be a colleague of Severus Snape's. Severus Snape, whose temper was even more unstable than hers, and who was far more easily irritated. While she did not suffer fools gladly, Severus Snape did not suffer them at all. Making a mental note to ask Deanna to keep her updated on the situation, she began to cheer up immensely. This year looked like it was going to be fun...

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Chapter Two A Result Least Expected

The Hogwarts Express blew its whistle, causing Luella to start.

"I really wish it wouldn't do that so suddenly!" she complained to Deanna.

"Wuss." Deanna said casually. "Here, give me a hand with this trunk, with all those extra books Mum's making me take, it's going to need two of us to stabilise it." Luella sighed, produced her wand and gave Deanna a hand getting her trunk into the luggage rack.

Marlie eyed the precariously balanced trunks carefully. "Are you sure that rack's strong enough to hold four heavier than usual trunks?"

"It'll hold." Rianne said calmly. "Come on, Marls, this is the Hogwarts Express we're talking about here, not British Rail you know!" Rianne had had her first journey on a Muggle train that summer and had not been impressed ("you mean we have to share a carriage with everyone else on the train? And look at the colour scheme, it's hideous").

Marlie continued to look at the trunks dubiously. "Well, if you say so. But I'm not happy about this."

The door to their compartment opened, and Hermione poked her head into the room.

"Hello, you lot." she said, trying to sound cheerful, but without success.

"Hi Hermie." Deanna grinned. She glanced into the corridor and raised an eyebrow. "Potter and Weasley not around?"

"That's just it." Hermione said nervously. "The Weasleys haven't turned up yet and I'm worried. I mean, it's nearly eleven, the train'll be leaving soon, what if they miss it?"

"We get a peaceful year?" Marlie said hopefully.

"The Gryffindor Quidditch team falls apart with three key members missing and we get to erase the still painful memories of last year?" Rianne said.

Marlie winced. Luella felt for her. Marlie had been Slytherin Seeker last year, but owing to Gryffindor narrowly beating Slytherin in the House Cup, had lost her place on the team. While Marlie had taken the news far better than Luella would have in the same position, that didn't mean she liked to discuss or be reminded of the fact.

"I'm sure they'll turn up, Herm." Luella said quietly. "Mrs. Weasley's not the type to let them hang around. They'll be here."

"I hope you're right." Hermione said timidly. Luella gave her a hug. Harry and Ron were Hermione's two best friends, and without them Hermione was in for a lonely time.

"Hey. They'll make it. It'll be OK. We'll look after you, won't we?"

"Eh? What?" said Deanna absently.

"Yeah, whatever." Marlie said vaguely.

"Absolutely, Lu." Rianne said, her attention on her Potions textbook. Luella sighed.

"Well, you've still got me, mate. You can join us until they turn up if you want."

"Thanks. I'd like that." Hermione smiled.

Deanna sat up, her attention caught by something on the platform outside. Turning to Marlie, she gave her a nudge.

"Wake up, Lovegood. I think your lover boy Freddie's turned up."

Marlie straightened up immediately. "Tyler, shut up. Where is he?" she asked, gazing out of the window.

Her question was soon answered as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's voices were heard, telling their children to behave at school, look after their younger siblings, and other things of that nature. Luella noticed Percy, the oldest Weasley, get on board, followed by the twins. Marlie got up and went out to greet them. Luella and Hermione looked at each other, smiled with relief and went to see where Harry and Ron were.

"Hi boys!" Marlie fluttered her eyelashes at them.

"Hey, Lovegood." Fred grinned back. "Did you miss us?"

"Miss you?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Fred, I was round your house only the other week. I've not had time to miss you!"

"Oh, so you would have done if you'd had the chance?" laughed George. Marlie scowled at him.

"Where's Harry got to, then?" Luella asked. "I don't see him or Ron anywhere."

Fred turned around. Sure enough, his parents were even now seeing Ginny on to the train, but of Harry and Ron, there was no sign.

"That's strange." he said, frowning. "They were right behind us. And the train's about to leave, they can't be hanging around the platform still. Hey, Mum, where's Ron and Harry?"

Mrs. Weasley looked up from saying goodbye to her daughter. "Aren't they with you?" she said, surprised. She looked hastily up and down the platform. No Ron. No Harry.

"Ron? Harry?" she called out. No reply. "Boys, this isn't funny! Boys? Where are you?" She sounded increasingly desperate. Mr. Weasley tried to comfort her.

"Maybe they just got held up, Molly. You know what boys are like, always dawdling."

"Arthur, the train is about to leave, if they miss it, gods know how they're going to get to school!" Mrs. Weasley was beside herself. "This is no time for pranks!"

Ginny's lower lip began to tremble. She looked almost as distraught as her mother. "They'll get in trouble, won't they? They'll get expelled, won't they?"

Hermione gave the girl a hug. "Ssh, it's all right, Ginny. I'm sure people miss the Hogwarts Express every year and don't get expelled for it." She looked at Mrs. Weasley. "Do you want us to come and look for them?"

"No time." Mr. Weasley said. "The train really is about to leave, we can't have you lot being late and all. We'll sort it out, don't you worry."

"Fred, George, you look after your sister, do you hear me?" Mrs. Weasley said. The twins nodded. Mr. Weasley closed the train door and followed his wife off to search for the boys.

In the distance, a whistle blew. Slowly but surely, the train began to pull out of the station. Luella exchanged a concerned look with Hermione. The Hogwarts Express was underway and Harry and Ron weren't on it. This was not good news.

Ginny began to cry. "They've missed the train, they've missed the train!" she wept. "They'll get expelled, they'll never be able to get jobs, and it's all my fault! If only I hadn't gone back for my diary, we'd've been on time!"

Hermione gave Ginny a hug. "Ssh, Ginny, it's OK. It's not your fault. The rest of your family made it, didn't they? Not your fault those two couldn't turn up on time if they had a Time Turner to help them."

Luella knelt next to them both. "I'm sure they'll be fine, Ginny. Your mum and dad'll get them to school somehow. You'll see." Ginny dried her eyes, nodding mutely, but did not look happy.

Marlie spoke up. "Hey, Ginny. Ever played Jenga?"

"Jenga?" Ginny asked, confused.

"Yeah, it's a Muggle game. Deanna's got a set with her. It's really easy, I'll teach you how to play if you like." Marlie smiled warmly.

Ginny nodded. "OK."

Marlie smiled. "Cool. Lu, Herm, fancy joining us?"

"Yeah, go on then. Hermi?"

Hermione assented.

"Boys? You up for it?" Marlie grinned.

"Nah, we'll leave you to it." said Fred.

"Yeah, we're off to catch up with Lee, see what he's managed to bring to school this year."

"If it comes anywhere near me, it's dead." Marlie told them as they left.

Ginny's spirits improved as the journey progressed, to the extent that certain Slytherins were beginning to wish she'd stayed miserable.

"Marlie, why'd you invite her along?" Deanna murmured in Marlie's ear.

"Felt sorry for her." Marlie muttered back.

"Not one of your finest ideas, was it?"

Ginny, to her surprise, had proved to be quite good at Jenga and was now consistently winning.

"I like this game!" she said, bouncing up and down. "I'm going to ask Mum and Dad to get me one for Christmas. We can play with it in the common room, it'll be great!"

"Any idea what house you'll be in yet?" Luella asked. She was beginning to warm to the youngest Weasley.

Ginny shrugged. "Not really thought about it much. I suppose I'll be in Gryffindor, all my brothers were, and Mum and Dad too. What house are you in, Luella? Are you a Gryffindor too?"

Luella, not yet in her school uniform, coughed rather nervously. "Slytherin." she said hastily.

Ginny's eyes widened. "Slytherin?" She looked rather shocked and backed away. Luella hung her head. Evidently Ginny shared her brothers' prejudice.

"Yes, Slytherin." she said, a little harshly. "Got a problem?"

"No." Ginny said, her voice trembling. "It's just that..." She frowned, looking a little confused.

"What is it, Ginny?" Hermione asked gently.

"Well, didn't you and Harry say that Luella helped you defeat You-Know-Who last year?" Ginny said, puzzled.

"That's right." Hermione nodded.

"But... how could she have done if she's in Slytherin? I mean, don't they all support You-Know-Who?"

The room fell silent. Rianne put down her Potions textbook. Marlie put her customised Nintendo Game Boy to one side. Deanna stopped idly strumming her guitar and looked up. As one, all three girls gave Ginny the feared Slytherin Look. Hermione buried her face in her hands, clearly mortified. Luella sighed. This was going to be interesting.

"Ginny," Deanna said, just a little too calmly for Luella's liking, "let me give you a little survival tip. When you're in a room full of Slytherins, it is not generally considered a good idea to stand up and say things like 'All Slytherins are Death Eaters'. Is it, folks?"

"Right up there with walking through rural Alabama with a gay rights t-shirt on." said Marlie.

"Or walking into an Orthodox Jewish household on Yom Kippur and saying 'Who's for a bacon sandwich then?'" commented Rianne.

"You're all Slytherins?" Ginny gasped, moving nearer to Hermione for reassurance.

"Yes dear, we are." Rianne said acidly.

Ginny looked wildly at Hermione. "Help!" she whispered. Hermione gave her a cuddle. "Don't be scared, Ginny, they're not into Dark Arts, any of them. You know Marlie, don't you? And I can promise you, Lu's perfectly nice."

Luella gave Ginny a smile. "It's OK. Despite what you've heard, we're not all Dark mages. I mean, look at Deanna and Marlie, their mothers work at the DDAE, and they were Slytherins."

Ginny seemed to regain her confidence. "What about Rianne's mum?"

The temperature dropped once more. Deanna just buried her head in her hands, Marlie shot a nervous glance at Rianne while Luella just sighed. Rianne had a very firm McGonagall look on her face.

"She's dead. Died when I was a kid." she said coldly. Ginny blushed.

"Sorry." she said timidly. "I didn't know."

"Looks like she takes after her brothers all right." Deanna said. "That typical Gryffindor tact's coming right over."

"Deanna!" Luella snapped. "She didn't know."

"No, suppose not. Sorry, Ginny."

"Well, it'll save the Sorting Hat a job at any rate." sighed Marlie. "Ginny, have no fear. You'll be a Gryffindor."

Ginny mumbled something. Luella decided to change the subject, but didn't get the chance. The door opened. All six of them turned to see who it was. And four of them immediately reached for their wands.

Draco grinned cockily as he sauntered in. "Well, hello, the Mudblood and Muggle lovers Convention has reconvened for another year, I see." He looked around. "Where's Potter and Weasel? Planning their engagement party or something?"

"They got held up. Missed the train." Deanna said coldly. "Malfoy, is there something you wanted to tell us? Because you're in my light."

Draco actually looked a little disappointed. "You what? Missed the train?"

"That's right. They didn't make it onto the platform in time and it went without them." Rianne said. "Oh." Draco said, crestfallen. "So neither of them are on the Hogwarts Express at all?"

"No, Malfoy, they are not." Marlie said. "Like Rianne and DT just told you. Clean your ears out, boy, I've seen Hufflepuffs take things in better."

Draco ignored the insult, looking rather put out. "Oh. Never mind. Guess I'll see you all at school then." He turned and left.

Rianne rubbed her eyes and looked at Marlie. "What's up with him? He had the four of us here, a Muggle-born Gryffindor and a Weasley and didn't pick a fight! Is he well?"

"Well thank the gods you noticed that too." Marlie said in confusion. "Otherwise I'd've thought I'd gone mad."

"What's wrong with him?" Deanna demanded, insulted. "Are we not worth fighting anymore?" She got up, walked to the compartment door, and yelled into the corridor, "Oi, Malfoy! Get back here and fight like a man, ya coward! I demand you pick a fight with us!"

"Is it me, or did he seem rather disappointed that the Boy Who Lived hadn't made it?" said Luella thoughtfully.

Both Deanna and Marlie started to grin. "Malfoy fancies Potter, Malfoy fancies Potter!" Marlie giggled.

"Blackmail!!" Deanna laughed. "Now, what can we get him to do in return for us not telling his father that?"

"Anything you want, I should imagine." observed Rianne.

"Harry's not involved with him, is he?" Ginny quavered.

Luella laughed. "Of course not! They hate each other. However, they do say that love and hate are very closely related, and it's starting to look like Draco Malfoy might be having tendencies towards the former."

"Well, I hope you're not really going to blackmail him." said Hermione. "I know he's Malfoy and everything, but you could get in real trouble for that!"

"Ooh, yeah, that's a point. We could lose points for that, a lot of points." Rianne said, worried. "Can't afford a repeat of last year!"

"No, we can't. Hey, thanks for that, Hermi, you've just saved us from throwing the Cup away!" Deanna grinned. Hermione groaned, wishing she'd kept quiet.

Ginny was openmouthed. "You actually plan how you're going to win the Cup?"

"Oh yes." Rianne said casually. "We're Slytherins, this is what we do."

"See, we're united by our ambition. And our main ambition is to win. To be the best, at everything." Marlie said. "Which is why we go to the lengths we do, and why we won both Cups seven years in a row, until last year, which I'd really rather not talk about."

"Oh." Ginny said. She frowned. "It all sounds like hard work to me. I mean, I wouldn't mind winning the Cup, but I couldn't be bothered calculating what'll win and lose points like you lot."

"Which is why you're going to be a Gryffindor." said Rianne. She glanced out of the window. "I suppose we'd better get changed into our uniforms - I recognise those mountains. We'll be there soon."

The other girls nodded, and started retrieving their Hogwarts robes.

The four Slytherins and Hermione disembarked from the coach that had dropped them off outside Hogwarts.

"Nice to be back, isn't it?" Deanna sighed, stretching her legs.

Hermione looked troubled. "I wish Harry and Ron were here." she whispered.

"They'll make it." Luella said gently, patting Hermione on the shoulder. "Somehow. If Ron's got any of his brothers' ingenuity, they'll find a way."

"Hope Ginny's OK." Marlie said, watching the boats that carried the new first years glide across the lake.

"You're being rather charitable towards her, aren't you?" Deanna asked in surprise. Marlie shrugged.

"She's a good kid. Sweet little thing. And Ron's her favourite brother. I just hope she's not too worried about him. I mean, coming to Hogwarts for the first time is scary enough as it is."

They were distracted by a shape coming out of the sky. Luella turned and saw a peregrine falcon swoop down majestically, coming to land on Deanna's outstretched arm.

"Nestra!" Deanna grinned. "Good Nestra. Hey girl, what've you got for me, eh?"

Nestra dropped a rolled up paper into Deanna's waiting hand, which turned out to be the evening edition Daily Prophet.

"Ooh, news, what's happening out there?" Rianne asked, curious. Deanna allowed Nestra to hop on to her shoulder and read. She raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"I'm telling you, folks, this paper gets more trashy every time I read it. The Weekly World News has got more sensible stories than this thing sometimes. Look at this. 'Flying Car Mystifies Muggles'. I mean!"

A horrible thought struck Luella. "Wait a second. What sort of car?"

Deanna scanned the article. "Turquoise Ford Anglia, according to one eyewitness. Why?"

"A turquoise Anglia?" Marlie said sharply. "The Weasleys have got one of them."

"And it can fly..." Rianne said, the same thought that had occurred to Luella occurring to her.

"You don't think...?" Deanna asked.

"Harry and Ron?" gasped Hermione. "Oh no, they're going to be in so much trouble for this!"

"In trouble for what, Miss Granger?" a cold, cruel voice came from behind them. All five turned round. Behind them stood the Head of Slytherin House, Professor Severus Snape.

They all looked frantically at each other. Yes, the Slytherins were his favourite students and usually quite adept at dealing with him, but not this time. While they

were good at getting themselves out of trouble with Snape, getting Harry and Ron out of trouble was something else entirely.

"Uncharacteristically quiet, aren't we?" he said, slightly menacingly. "You surprise me, you four always have plenty to say for yourselves while you, Miss Granger, never normally resist a chance to show off your knowledge. So enlighten me. What have Potter and Weasley done now?"

"We don't know, we've not seen them." Rianne said, truthfully enough. Well, it was true, they didn't know for sure.

Snape fixed Hermione with his most dangerous look. "Normally right by your side, are they not? Why not today? Miss Granger, please explain to me exactly what is going on or I will start deducting points from Gryffindor for every second you waste. I'm waiting."

Hermione stared miserably at the Slytherins, her eyes begging for help. Luella could take it no longer.

"They missed the train, sir. Hermione was worried they'd get in trouble for being late." she said quietly. It was true in part, anyhow. However, Snape did not look convinced.

"If that is so, then why are you all huddled round Miss Tyler's newspaper as if it's just announced the return of Lord Voldemort?" Snape seemed almost amused as both Rianne and Hermione flinched at his use of the name. Reaching out, he plucked the newspaper from Deanna's hands and read the front page. Enlightenment seemed to dawn on him. All five girls stared at the ground, their hearts sinking.

"I see." he said quietly. "All right. Get to the feast, we may as well have some students make it on time. Five points from Gryffindor for wasting my time, Miss Granger." He turned on his heel and left, taking the newspaper with him.

"Do I get my paper back at any point?" Deanna demanded. Hermione was close to tears.

"They'll get expelled for sure!" she sobbed. "He's always looking for an excuse to pick on them, and now he's got the perfect reason to get rid of them!"

"They won't get expelled. Will they?" Marlie asked anxiously.

"Not by Snape." Rianne said casually. "They're Gryffindors, he can't expel them. That's Dumbledore and McGonagall's decision. Ah well. No use worrying about it now. Let's get inside."

They had not long settled down at the Slytherin table when their fears were confirmed. The chatter and babbling of three hundred students was immediately brought to a

hush by a deafening crash from outside. Silence followed, then came the unmistakable sound of the Whomping Willow thrashing around.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Marlie asked wearily.

"Depends." said Rianne. "If you're thinking, do you have a hope in hell of seducing Hagrid, then no. However, if you're thinking, could that be our dear Gryffindor friends Potter and Weasley making an entrance, then yes, I am."

"Looks like they did take the car then." Deanna murmured. "Although I think their landing technique could use a little work."

Professor Dumbledore called for silence. Calling a smirking Professor Snape over, he said a few words to him. The Potions Master lost no time, turning swiftly away and stalking out, presumably to investigate. Dumbledore made no other response, merely announcing that seeing as everyone was ready, they might as well proceed immediately with the Sorting.

The lights dimmed. Soon, all was darkness, apart from candles glimmering on the tables. Slowly, majestically, the great doors at the main entrance swung open, and Professor McGonagall led the first years in.

Luella sought out Ginny, pale and frightened in her uniform, which made her look even shorter than she already was. Marlie was also watching Ginny closely, looking rather concerned. Despite her frequent bickering with the Weasley twins, she was really quite good friends with them, and that liking had clearly extended itself to their little sister.

The Sorting Ceremony began. Luella allowed most of it to pass over her, clapping politely when one of them became a Slytherin. She clapped that bit harder when the names Montague, Autumn, clearly the younger sister of Summer and Winter Montague, and Vetinari, Lydia, evidently part of the same family that had spawned Lucas and Laetitia, were sorted into Slytherin.

And then, finally, the last first years were Sorted, and it was Ginny Weasley's turn.

Ginny had spent most of the Ceremony in a daze. Everyone else appeared to have already formed little cliques, and she had been feeling a little left out.

Before they'd been led into the Great Hall, she'd found herself in conversation with two other girls, one dark-haired, green eyed, olive-skinned girl with a decidedly aristocratic air, and the other fair-skinned with light-brown hair and hazel eyes. They'd introduced themselves as Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague.

"Autumn?" Ginny had asked in surprise. "That's an unusual name."

"My mum's idea." Autumn had explained. "We're all named after the seasons in our family. My older sibs are called Summer and Winter. Summer's a Gemini, Winter a Sag, I'm a Libra, hence the names."

"The Montagues always were a bit funny like that." Lydia drawled. "My family prefer to stay true to our Roman roots." She looked Ginny over, with the air of someone well used to assessing a person's social status. "So what family do you come from then? I assume your family are one of us." Ginny suddenly felt very conscious of wearing second-hand, ill-fitting robes.

"One of us?" Ginny said, confused. "I don't think we're related to the Vetinaris. And I don't know what house your family are in."

"Well, of course not." said Lydia patiently. "But they are mages, aren't they?"

"Well, yes." Ginny said. "Does it matter?"

"Not as much as it used to." the other girl sighed.

"Nothing wrong with a bit of Muggle blood." Autumn said. "My father reckons a bit of hybrid vigour strengthens the magic. Bit like with horses. Breeding in a few Muggle horses or mongrels, can produce better specimens. My parents run a stable for magical horses, you know."

"A few, Autumn, not the whole damn family tree. So you are a pure-blood then." Lydia said, turning back to Ginny.

"I think so." Ginny said uneasily. Autumn didn't seem too bad, but Lydia was giving her the creeps.

"What's your name?" Autumn asked.

"Ginny. Ginny Weasley."

Both girls turned to each other, nodding knowingly.

"Say no more." Lydia laughed. "We've heard of that family." She gave Ginny a pitying look, letting her eyes drift over Ginny's robes. "Obvious really, the robes should have told me if the hair didn't."

"Oh, Lydia, leave her." said Autumn. "She'll be a Gryffindor, they all are. Looks like it'll be just you and me in the Slyths then, the other girls don't look up to much."

"Looks like it." Lydia had sighed as she'd followed her friend away. "This is going to be a pretty boring year if it's just us in a dorm. Still, my brother reckons that sharing a common room with Marlie Lovegood and Deanna Tyler's never dull, even if they are both Muggle lovers."

Ginny had watched them go, clenching her fists in helpless anger. She'd never really been looked down on before, quite the reverse. As the youngest, and the only girl, she'd been bought things and given privileges that her brothers had missed out on. She'd never had to share a room, had rarely had to wear hand-me-downs and had been spoilt rotten by her entire family. It was quite a shock to see someone like Lydia Vetinari giving her snide looks. Shock, however, turned quite swiftly into rage. How

dare she? How dare she look down on her like that? Just because we don't have much money, and we're Gryffindors, she thought, furious. Well, I'll show her. I'll show her that I'm worth a bit of respect. I'll show all of them!

It was in this frame of mind that she'd sleepwalked through the ceremony, coming up with imaginative fantasies of getting her own back and proving to the world that just because her family was poor didn't mean that she wasn't important. Only the sound of her own name being called out brought her back to reality.

"Weasley, Virginia!" Ginny nearly jumped out of her skin. She wasn't used to being called by her full name. And she certainly didn't feel ready for the Sorting. No help for it now though. Shaking, she walked to the stool and sat down. One last glance at her brothers on the Gryffindor table, all watching her intently, George giving her a wink and Fred mouthing "Go, sis!" No Ron though. Her heart sank. She really wished he'd been here; he might be her big brother but that didn't mean they didn't get on. Sighing, she pulled on the Hat.

Immediately, a sense of peace came over her, as if the rest of the world had disappeared and it was just her and the Hat. So it was that she got the shock of her life when she heard a voice speaking to her.

"Hmm, interesting. Very interesting. Loyal, patient, quite hardworking. Hufflepuff might suit you, yes indeed. But you're also a tough young lady, aren't you? Quite the fiery one, but brave too. So perhaps Gryffindor for you."

My brothers are all Gryffindors, she thought idly.

"Maybe. But it's you I'm concerned about now. And you are not your brothers. In fact, I get the feeling you're quite the little star at home, or at least, you'd like to be. Quite a few big dreams you have there, and the talent to achieve them too."

Really? Ginny thought.

"Yes, really. So where shall I put you?"

Ginny couldn't answer for a moment, she was too overwhelmed by the idea of being able to take on the world to respond. I could do it! she thought. Really achieve something, never have to wear second-hand clothes again, show that Lydia Vetinari what a Weasley's capable of!

She addressed the Hat again. All right. Put me where I can make my dreams come true. Put me in whatever house is best for someone who wants to make something of their life. Where I can make the most of my talents and be appreciated.

"So that's your wish, is it? Well, in that case, there's really only one option. The House of the Ambitious it is! SLYTHERIN!"

What?? Ginny thought, incredulously, ripping the Hat off her head. Slytherin? I can't be, I just can't. She looked at her sash and hat-band in disbelief. Green and silver. Oh gods...

Panicking, she stared pleadingly at her brothers, desperate for reassurance. There was none there. Fred and George looked too stunned to give any support, while Percy looked simply furious. The enormity of it hit her. She was a Slytherin. The lone Slytherin in a family of Gryffindors. Already, Percy was turning against her. Fred and George would probably follow when the shock wore off. Her parents' reactions, she didn't want to think about. And as for Ron... Dear Gaia, he's going to hate me, she thought, horrified. Of all the family, Ron was the most vocal about how horrible Slytherins were. And now his little sister was one. At least you weren't here to see it, Ron, she thought, head bowed in misery as she made her way slowly to the Slytherin table.

The Slytherin table appeared almost as stunned as the Gryffindor one. While some younger Slytherins were clapping, most were turning to their friends whispering "A Weasley? Here?"

Deanna blinked rapidly. "Ginny? Slytherin? Did I hear that right?"

"Well, she's heading this way and she's got green and silver tied round her waist." Rianne observed. "I'd say that's a pretty good sign, wouldn't you?"

"She doesn't look too happy." Luella said, worried. "Poor thing, her family aren't going to be pleased with her."

"You're right." said Marlie. "They're really not going to like this." She reached out as Ginny approached like one in a trance, taking the stricken girl by the hand and guiding her into the space next to her. "Hey, Gin." she said, smiling warmly in an attempt to comfort her.

Ginny slid listlessly onto the bench. Slowly, she raised her eyes to Marlie's. Luella flinched from the look there, one of sheer, abject hopelessness.

"I'm a Slytherin." she whispered.

"Yes, you certainly are." Marlie said, placing an arm tenderly around her.

"How?" Ginny whispered, rubbing her eyes. "How can I be Slytherin? My family are all Gryffindors, why aren't I one? How the hell did I end up here?"

"That's what we'd all like to know." said Rianne.

"The Sorting Hat's buggered, it must be." said Deanna. "We'll have a word with Professor Snape, get him to have you re-Sorted."

"Tyler, the Sorting Hat does not do cock-ups." Rianne snapped. "Well, Gin, looks like you're here for the duration. Welcome to les Verts-et-Argents."

Ginny buried her head in Marlie's flowing locks and began to cry. Marlie comforted her as best she could, glaring at Rianne.

"Have a bit of sensitivity, Stormer! The poor girl's about to be disowned by half her family, show some sympathy! Look, don't cry, Ginny love. It'll be all right. The Hat wouldn't have put you here if you didn't belong here. They'll understand in time. You'll see."

Ginny looked up, wiping the tears away.

"I can't possibly belong here, can I? I mean, I'm not devious, I'm not manipulative or cunning or ruthless or sarcastic or anything like that. I'm hopeless of thinking up put-downs and one-liners and I can't do threats to save my life."

"She's got a point." Deanna said. "Marls, she has no Slyth qualities whatsoever."

"Tyler, be quiet!" Marlie snapped. "You're not helping. Well, you must have some, Gin. What did you say to the Hat to get put here?"

"I told it I wanted to go somewhere I could make the most of my talents and get some respect. Told it I was tired of being looked down on and taken for granted. I wanted..." she gulped, choking on her tears. "I wanted some power."

Marlie sighed wearily, exchanging looks with her friends, all three of whom were beginning to understand. "Well, you're in the right place for that, Ginny love. Look, don't worry about it. I'm sure your parents and brothers will come round. In the meantime, you just keep that lust for power in your mind. Pretty soon, you'll be wondering why you ever wanted to be a Gryffindor."

"I doubt it." whispered Ginny. "I doubt it."

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Chapter Three Gryffindor No More

That night in the Serpent's Nest, all of the dorms were alive with gossip about their unexpected new arrival, but two more so than most.

Marlie was pacing the floor in the fourth year dorm, too keyed up to go to bed even if she'd wanted to.

"Marls, go to bed." yawned Deanna. "You'll wear the floor out, pacing like that."

"You expect me to sleep after an evening like this!" snapped Marlie. "When the younger sister of friends of mine is facing the biggest crisis of her life?"

"Not like you to get so worked up over something like this, Marlie." Rianne observed. "She's only a firstie, and not even related to you either. Surely you don't need to bother about her?"

"Yes I bloody well do!" Marlie exploded. "If I don't, who else will? Her only childhood playmates were her older brothers. Her Gryffindor older brothers. The entire set up of that family is based on all the kids ending up in Gryffindor. They're not going to want anything to do with her now, are they? And even if they did, there's precious little they can do if she's in a different house. Ginny has no one, Ri, no one! If I don't take care of her, no one will. Do you honestly think I'm leaving an innocent young Gryffindor raised child like her to fend for herself in a house like this! I mean, look at her." She gestured helplessly. "No guile, no cunning, no wits about her whatsoever. She's not going to last two minutes on her own."

"Especially not if she's going to come out with classics like 'Don't all Slytherins support Voldemort?'" Deanna laughed.

Luella met Marlie's eyes. "Bloody hell, Marls, she hasn't got a hope, has she?"

"I wouldn't say that." Marlie said, her eyes taking on a reflective look that clearly meant she was planning something. "She's here, after all. She does have ambitions, she does want power. She has... potential. I just need to help her develop it."

"Will you do it in time, though?" Rianne asked.

"In time for what?" asked Marlie.

"Before she goes under." Rianne explained. "We've got to help her settle in and put some roots down, and soon. She'll need to make friendships, or at least establish non-hostile relations with the other girls in her dorm, make some friends close to her in age, learn how to protect herself from those who would take advantage, and generally assert herself as a force to be reckoned with. All this needs to be done soon. We can't protect her forever, after all."

Marlie looked thoughtful. "Who is she in a dorm with?"

"Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague." Deanna said promptly.

"Lucas and Winters' kid sisters." said Luella. "What are they like, does anyone know?"

"Autumn's nice enough." Marlie said. "I gather she has a tendency to follow Lydia around though."

"What's Lydia like?" asked Deanna.

"Not so good." Rianne told her. "Bit of a brat, and rather taken with herself. Spoilt rotten. Her pure-blood status has gone to her head a bit."

"Damn." Marlie punched her hand in frustration. "Likely to pick on a Weasley then. Well, we'll have to see what we can do. Ri, can you get Lucas to have a word with her? Warn her that it might not be prudent to make an enemy of her, get her to help her settle in, that sort of thing. Let it be known that I'm keeping an eye on her. I may not be Seeker any more, but I'm still Keeper of the Sound System and that has to count for something."

"Will do. I'll get Kat to have a word with Summer too - if Autumn can be persuaded to stand up to Lydia, she and Ginny might get on quite well. OK, that's her potential friends sorted out. What about her enemies? In particular, Malfoy."

They all looked at each other. How to persuade Draco Malfoy to leave Ginny alone?

"Marlie, you're his cousin. And he does hate you the least." said Luella. "Anything you can do?"

Marlie laughed. "Lu, the only language that boy understands is force, although he's also quite fluent in bribery, blackmail and corruption. And we've got no inducements strong enough to stop him picking on his arch-rival's younger sister."

"Just leaves force and intimidation then." said Deanna. "Leave it to me. First time he tries anything, he'll have me to deal with."

Rianne nodded sagely. "Excellent. Just leaves Snape."

The others all stared at her. "Snape??"

"I really am going mad!" exclaimed Marlie. "Rianne Stormosi saying something bad about Professor Snape? What is the world coming to?"

"Let's hear your reasoning then, Stormer." Deanna grinned. "I want to hear why you've gone off him."

"He may be our house head, he may be fond of us, he might treat us well, but I'm not blind." Rianne said, gazing into the fire. "I've seen how he treats the other students. I've seen how he treats Gryffindors. I've seen how he treats the Weasley boys."

"Ginny's a Slytherin, though." Luella said.

"If she's just a Slyth like everyone else, then why are we having a crisis meeting about her when we could all be sleeping?" Rianne asked, sarcasm tingeing her every word. "He won't look at her and see Slytherin, he'll look at her and see Weasley, which in his mind equals Gryffindor. The fact that she's in his house won't make any difference, in fact, it might annoy him more. We need someone who he likes, someone who he'll listen to, someone whose opinion he respects, to have a quiet word with him and persuade him to go easy on her. Volunteers, anyone?"

As one, they all looked at Deanna. "Hey, wait a second, you lot stop looking at me like that!" she said.

"Why not?" asked Rianne. "He likes you. I bet he'd give Harry Potter fifty points and a Prefect badge if you asked him."

"Hell, he'd probably give Neville Longbottom fifty points if *you* asked him, Tyler." Marlie smiled sweetly. "Go on DT, you know you want to."

Deanna looked helplessly at Luella. "Lu, help!"

"Don't look at me. You were saying over the summer about how maybe Snape wasn't so bad as he seemed. See this as an opportunity to get on his good side. Besides, Ri and Marlie are right. He does have a soft spot for you."

"All right." Deanna sighed. "I'll talk to him. I don't guarantee anything though. Now what?"

"We just need some one on one mentoring for Ginny. She's going to need a little tuition on how to be a Slyth." Rianne said thoughtfully. She turned to Luella. "Lu, any chance of a little Glamoury here and there? Make Ginny look a bit more powerful and intimidating."

"No." said Luella firmly. "First of all, Ginny needs to learn how to make people respect her for what she is, not because of some magical power not her own. Secondly, who do you think I am, the Lady of the Lake? I'm not all-powerful, Ri. Glamoury's primarily concerned with influencing how other people feel about me. I don't think I can make the whole of Slytherin House think Ginny's a demi-goddess. I can make them feel that way about me, and I can give individuals very precise instructions on how to act, but not the whole house. The more people I'm trying to influence, the less precise the results are. That's very advanced stuff you're talking about there, it'd take a lot of power. Caitlin reckons I should pace myself, start off small."

"Caitlin, eh?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "When did you get on first-name terms with her, you're normally so respectful."

"She said I could. She's been teaching me about Glamoury over the summer. Felt that if we were going to be working together, I might as well use her first name when my parents weren't around. But getting back to Ginny. No, Glamoury is out of the question. But I'm willing to befriend the kid. Wouldn't be the first time I've had to help out friendless little first years after all." Luella smiled, thinking of Hermione, who had also needed a bit of mentoring before she could really settle in.

"Me too." chipped in Marlie. "After all, she knows me already, and she'll need to learn some proper Slytherin qualities too. No offence Lu, but manipulation's not really your strong point."

"Now, now, Marls, I hope you're not going to turn her into a conniving fiend." said Deanna amiably.

"Deanna, you wound me! I'm very hurt by the insinuation that I'd corrupt her."

"Not denying it though, are you?" Deanna responded tartly.

Marlie smiled. "I am only going to bring out and enhance what is there, DT. No more."

"Well, we'll trust you. Lu, keep her in line, won't you?"

"I'll do my best. Right, with all that sorted, let's get some sleep. Because I'm knackered."

Had Ginny been aware of all the planning going into her education as a Slytherin, she would no doubt have been amazed at all the effort involved, not to mention greatly reassured that someone was looking out for her. However, right now, she had never felt so miserable.

Lydia and Autumn were regarding her with looks of amazement, Lydia combining it with an amused grin.

"Well, well, well. A Weasley in Slytherin. This is a surprise. Sorting Hat having an off-day, was it?"

Ginny glared at her. "No. I asked to be here. Sort of."

"Sort of?" Lydia asked derisively. "Did you want to be here or not?"

"Well, no." admitted Ginny. "I told it I wanted to succeed and be special. And it said I belonged here."

Lydia and Autumn exchanged knowing looks. "Well, it's good to know that there's at least one member of your family who doesn't subscribe to the poor but happy worldview."

"Lydia!" said Autumn. "Ignore her, Ginny, she's a complete snob. Anyhow, welcome to Slytherin. It's not as bad as it's made out. Really! My sibs reckon it's by far the best house to be in. We have the best parties. And a sound system, whatever that is. And the coolest decorations, thanks to Marlie Lovegood."

"Marlie did the decorations?" Ginny asked. She recalled Fred and George joking about Marlie's taste, or lack of it. "Oh gods, the common room's not all pink and fluffy, is it? I didn't really see it properly earlier."

"Apparently there's some kind of lamp with a naturally glowing crystal that has a pink and fluffy shade." said Autumn.

"And a globe covered in little mirrors that hangs from the ceiling and rotates." added Lydia.

"Then, right, there's these really weird elongated egg shaped things with these coloured globules in them which float around. Winter reckons they're called magma lights, or something."

"Lava lamps." said Lydia. "Then there's the extra chairs that the woman's installed. Some of them look like these weird coloured bubbles shaped like chairs. While others are made of cloth and stuffed with beans and don't even look like chairs at all, just round shapeless lumps. Lucas reckons they're quite comfy, although useless for studying in."

Ginny felt her mind boggle. She could hardly wait to see what the common room looked like.

"What else has she done to it?" Ginny asked, her misery beginning to abate a little. Slytherin was beginning to sound like a fun place to be.

"Not sure, but I think leopardskin might be involved." said Autumn.

"Erm... lovely." said Ginny, trying not to imagine.

"See? You've mastered sarcasm already." said Lydia approvingly. "We'll have a Slytherin out of you yet. Stick with us, girlie, you could learn a lot. You know, when I first saw you, I wasn't sure about you, but now I get to know you, I'm changing my mind."

"Really?" asked Ginny, still a little wary of her.

"Oh yes." Lydia said airily. "You looked a bit weak, and just a little too wholesome for your own good. Appearances can be so deceiving, can't they?" She flashed Ginny a smile, which Ginny was not entirely convinced by.

"So I'm not weak or wholesome then?"

"Not if the Sorting Hat put you here." said Autumn. "I mean, assuming it was working all right, which I'm sure it was, if it thought you belonged here then you must have

some Slytherin qualities. Which means you're not weak or wholesome. Although it did put Luella Martin here so..."

"Luella Martin who singlehandedly fought off You-Know-Who?" said Lydia sarcastically. "Luella Martin who can make even Draco Malfoy walk in fear of her if she puts her mind to it? Luella Martin who hangs around with Deanna Tyler? That Luella Martin? Autumn, open your eyes. She is no weakling if all I've heard is true. She's a Slytherin. There are no weak Slytherins. She might be a Mudblood, but she's one I don't want to get on the wrong side of."

Ginny gasped. "You can't use that word! It's really insulting."

"I'd never use it to her face." said Lydia carelessly. "Anyway, she might be a Muggle-born, but at least she's one of our Muggle-borns. You're right, it's not really done to call a fellow Slythie Mudblood. The others though, are fair game..."

"But it's not very nice." said Ginny, having doubts about this take on life.

Both Autumn and Lydia laughed at this. "Nice?" laughed Autumn. "Ginny, Slytherins do not do nice. We do pragmatic. We do better than everyone else. We do not, repeat, NOT do nice."

"Ginny, dear," said Lydia. "you're a Slytherin. That simple fact will mark you out. Everyone else is going to envy you, hate you, call you names, call you Death Eater. Why do they do this?"

"I don't know." said Ginny, deciding that replying "Because it's true?" was not a good ploy.

"Because they're jealous!" Lydia explained. "We are better than everyone else in this school. We are the ones with the talent, the drive, the will to achieve, and we get the top rewards. There's a reason why most of the privileged, wealthy pure-blood families end up here, you know! Because we want to be successful more than any other house. Trust me, Ginny, you want to be the best, this is the place to come. You want to succeed?"

"Yes. Yes I do." said Ginny.

"You want to have the world at your feet?"

"Yes." said Ginny, beginning to feel that desire for glory coming back.

"You want to be more than just average?"

"Absolutely." said Ginny, her unhappiness fading away. "I hate being poor. Being poor sucks! And I really hate people looking down on our family because of it!" She felt her anger flare up again, along with a vision of Lucius Malfoy insulting her father. Never again, she thought. I will make my fortune, or die trying. No one will ever look down on the Weasleys again.

"I'm going to be rich." Ginny said suddenly. "I'm going to make my fortune. I'm going to be richer than the Malfoys! And the whole country's going to know my name! I swear it!"

Autumn and Lydia gave each other a high-five. "She's one of us!" squealed Autumn. "Oh marvellous day!"

"It's so satisfying to see someone finally deciding they're not going to put up with obscurity any more." agreed Lydia. "I don't know how you could bear it for so long, my dear. Well, remember us when you're famous, won't you?"

"Course she will." snapped Autumn. "We'll be loaded ourselves by then. Come on, let's go to bed. Night, Ginny. See you in the morning."

"See you." Ginny yawned, pulling the curtains shut and settling into bed, still buzzing with excitement. Her misgivings were giving way to a sense of anticipation. Lydia and Autumn didn't seem too bad - at least, they seemed to like her now. And it was starting to sound like Slytherin was the fun place to be. She knew what a sound system was from listening to Marlie, and she knew that the Gryffindor common room definitely didn't have one. Plus she could feel her dreams edging that bit closer to reality. She'd often heard her parents say disapprovingly "Those Slytherins don't know what failure is, most of them. They could do with a few more setbacks, they could." Up until now, she'd agreed. Not any more. A whole house full of people who couldn't conceive of not doing well out of life! How could she not succeed surrounded by that sort of mentality? Turning over, she went to sleep, dreaming of riches, fame and generally being adored.

The following morning, however, it was not Ginny, but another Weasley that commanded Marlie and Luella's attention. Luella, desperate to find out if Harry and Ron were OK or not, decided to wait in the Entrance Hall for the two boys. Marlie, out of sheer curiosity and an unconfessed fondness for the various Weasleys, was also hovering around.

Luella felt her heart leap as Harry and Ron sauntered downstairs, apparently none the worse for wear. Hermione was walking ahead, evidently not talking to them. Waving to Luella, she walked on into the Great Hall. Luella waved back before turning her attention to Harry.

"Harry, my god, are you all right?" she said, concerned. "We heard you got caught flying Ron's dad's car. What happened? Are you expelled?"

Harry shook his head. "No, we survived, although I was worried. Snape caught us and he was not happy."

Marlie grinned. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing much." Harry said. "He was really sarcastic at us though."

Both girls winced. Snape being sarcastic was not a fate they'd wish on anyone.

"So what punishment did you get?" Luella asked.

"Well, he went and got McGonagall and Dumbledore. We got detention, missed the feast, and got made to feel really bad about it all." Harry told her.

"Did you lose any points?" Marlie asked hopefully.

"No, we managed to talk McGonagall out of it. Seeing as term hadn't started yet."

"Oh." Marlie said, disappointed. "Never mind. Next time perhaps."

"Marlie!" Luella snapped. "Sorry about her, Harry. She's obsessed with the points tally already."

"Trying to make up for last year, eh?" Ron grinned.

Marlie scowled at him. "Shut up Weasley."

Ron sniggered. "Sorry Lovegood. You lot got a new Seeker yet?"

"No." muttered Marlie darkly.

"Any idea who it'll be?" Harry asked, curious.

"No." Marlie said. "Our reserves really aren't up to first team Quidditch, any of them, and there's no one else I know who fancies their chances."

"There is." Luella sighed. "I think Malfoy would quite like a go. Heard him bragging to Crabbe and Goyle how now the way was open, maybe he was in with a chance. Reckons he'd love the chance to go up against you one on one, Harry. Marlie, stop sniggering!"

"Sorry." grinned Marlie. "Just the idea of Draco wanting to go one on one with Harry. Now there's an image."

Luella groaned. "Marlie, you disgust me sometimes. Great, now I'm going to have this image of Draco thrusting Harry up against the locker room wall and trying to ravish him in my head all day long. Cheers, Lovegood!"

Marlie looked hurt. "Lu, you say that like it's a bad thing."

Ron and Harry looked revolted. "Lovegood, shut up!" Ron yelled. "I did not need that! Oh god..."

"See, now look what you've started." said Luella. "Nice one, Marls. Can someone change the subject please?"

Something seemed to occur to Ron. "Hey, there was something I meant to ask you. Ginny. What house did she end up in? McGonagall didn't say, we didn't really spend much time in the common room last night, and when we asked Seamus, Dean and

Neville, they all went rather sheepish and wouldn't say anything. Hermione won't talk to us over the car incident, and I've not seen any of my brothers yet. You lot were there, where'd she end up?"

Luella and Marlie looked frantically at each other. "Are you going to tell him?" Marlie asked.

"You're a friend of the family, you tell him!"

"I know, but you're so much better at doing this sort of thing." Marlie smiled her most charming smile. Luella sighed and turned to Ron.

"Ron, there's not really an easy way to tell you this, but here goes. You see, Ginny didn't get put in Gryffindor."

"Oh." said Ron, dejected. "Oh well. Never mind, not the end of the world. Where did she end up? Hufflepuff, I suppose."

"Um, not quite." Marlie said hesitantly. "Ron, she ended up in..."

She never got the chance to finish the sentence. Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of the one person they least wanted to see.

"Well, well, well." Draco drawled as he sauntered into view, Crabbe and Goyle close behind. "Hello, Weasley. What a fine morning this is! How are your new Gryffindors? Our new Slytherins certainly meet our expectations. Although one of them we certainly didn't expect to acquire." He grinned malevolently. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle began sniggering.

"Malfoy, go away." snarled Marlie, going crimson.

"Oh, don't be like that, cousin! You were certainly giving a hearty welcome to our new arrival at the feast, weren't you? Don't you want to join in the celebrations then?"

"Malfoy, drop it." Luella said softly. "Drop it now, before I make you."

Draco regarded her coolly, although Luella was pleased to notice his usual contempt was missing. "You don't scare me, Martin." he said quietly, before turning back to Ron, studiously avoiding her gaze. Luella felt a rush of fear go up her spine. He can't possibly know! And yet someone's told him that hiding your eyes can help you resist Glamoury...

Ron looked at Malfoy, hostility tempered with confusion. "What are you talking about, Malfoy?"

"Yeah, Malfoy, spit it out. We don't have time for your games." said Harry.

"The celebration to welcome our most promising new recruit, of course." drawled Draco. "I must say, Weasley, my opinion of your family's gone up a few notches now.

Congratulations, we didn't think you had it in you. Who would have thought such an unremarkable family tree could have produced such a promising bloom?"

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron, baffled.

"Shut up, Malfoy!" yelled Marlie.

"Don't you know?" Draco asked innocently. "Did your brothers not feel brave enough to tell you the good news?"

"Malfoy, I'm warning you." said Luella, through gritted teeth. "One more word..."

"What good news? What don't I know? I've hardly seen my brothers since I got here. WILL SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" yelled Ron in frustration.

"Why, Ron, I'm talking about your lovely younger sister of course."

Ron went pale, before a look of fury crossed his freckled features. "What the hell do you know about my sister, Malfoy." he hissed dangerously.

"More than your family, evidently." Draco smiled, his teeth flashing in the sunlight like a shark's. "Congratulations, Weasley. You've a Slytherin in the family."

Marlie clapped her hands to her face. Luella felt her heart sink as the news fully penetrated Ron's consciousness.

"My sister... a Slytherin?" he said faintly. He shook himself, the shock wearing off. "You lying bastard, Malfoy! My sister is not a Slytherin, never will be a Slytherin, absolutely, definitely CANNOT BE SLYTHERIN!!" He lunged for Malfoy in rage. As one, Harry and Marlie leapt to restrain him.

"Leave him, Ron!" Harry gasped. "Don't let him get to you, you know what he's like." He turned to Luella. "Lu, he is lying, right?" He took in the look of shame on Luella's face. "Lu? Oh good god, please don't tell me..."

Ron, still struggling in Marlie and Harry's arms, looked at the door leading up from the dungeons. And instantly fell still, his mouth hanging open. Harry and Marlie released him and turned to look themselves.

Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague had just walked in, chatting brightly to another girl in between them, telling her about the Slytherin Quidditch team, who was on it, and how they were going to win the Cup this year. Even at a distance, there was no mistaking that red hair. Ginny.

She looked up, her eyes immediately falling on her brother. Lydia and Autumn noticed her stop, turned to look, and stopped talking.

For a moment, no one moved or spoke. Brother and sister just looked at each other in silence. Ron was first to respond. Brushing Harry and Marlie away, he strode over to

his sister. Trembling, Ginny hid her eyes, cowering in fear and shame. Ron gazed at her green and silver house colours, unable to speak. At length, he finally found his voice.

"No." he said quietly. "No way. This isn't happening, it can't be true, it just can't. Ginny, tell me, tell me it's a joke. Please." His eyes stared desperately at her, pleading with her to deny it, to lie to him if she had to, anything other than admit the truth.

Ginny finally raised her eyes to his, tears glistening on her cheek. "Ron." she choked. "Ron, I'm so, so sorry. Ron, please." She reached out to him. Ron stared in horror, before stepping swiftly out of reach.

"Don't touch me. Don't come near me." he whispered. Blood rushed to his cheeks as the rage came back. "Slytherin... Ginny, how could you? How *could* you?" he screamed at her.

"Ron, please!" Ginny begged, crying in earnest now. "I didn't ask to be Slytherin, I swear. You've got to believe me!"

"Believe you?" said Ron. "Believe a Slytherin? You have got to be kidding, your lot wouldn't know the truth if it waltzed up to them wearing pink pyjamas with leopardskin trim while doing the Lambada." He gave her a look of pure disgust. "My family gave you nothing but love all the time you were growing up. You had everything we could afford, any treats that were going, we let you have them because we wanted you to have the best. We cared for you, played with you, shared our secrets with you, loved you! And how do you repay us? You go over to them. All this time we thought you were our sweet little sister, our Gryffindor little sister, and it turns out you were nothing but a lying little Slytherin all along! Did you enjoy it, huh? Did you? Did you enjoy seeing us fall over ourselves to make you happy, lapping up the attention, all the while looking forward to the day you could join your real house and leave us behind? Did you?" yelled Ron at a terrified Ginny.

"No!" sobbed Ginny. "No, I didn't, I swear, I had no idea I'd be a Slytherin, I promise. I'm sorry, Ron, I'm so sorry, please don't hate me!"

"Hate you?" Ron gave her his most disgusted look. "Ginny, you're not worth hating. You mean nothing to me, nothing. Less than nothing. As of now, you are no longer my sister. In fact, I don't have a sister."

"Ron..." whispered Ginny. He didn't respond, just turned away and walked furiously into the Great Hall. Draco, his task accomplished, gave Ginny his widest shark's grin and followed him, Crabbe and Goyle with him.

Marlie walked straight over to Ginny and pulled her into a hug, blonde hair falling all over the crying girl. "Hush, Gin, it's all right. Don't cry. It's OK. He'll come round. He just needs to get used to the idea."

Ginny didn't answer, just burying her face in Marlie's hair and crying all the more as Marlie tried to console her.

Luella turned to Harry. "You'd better go after Ron, he's going to need all the support he can get. See if you can calm him down, talk him round." Harry nodded and followed Ron into the Great Hall.

Lydia and Autumn had remained silent throughout the entire exchange. They were now tentatively approaching Ginny, trying to speak but unsure what to say.

Marlie saved them the bother by speaking first. Looking up, she fixed them with her most intense expression.

"You are Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague, yes?"

They nodded.

"Ginny's dorm mates."

Again the nodding.

"Then listen to me. Ron is perhaps the most volatile member of her family. But what he says out loud, to her face, the rest of them will be thinking in silence, at some level. In a very real sense, Slytherin House is the only family she has left now. And as her dorm mates, you two are her closest relatives."

"And?" Lydia asked.

"And that means that the responsibility lies with you two, doesn't it?" Marlie said, her soft tones doing nothing to mask the fierceness. "I want you to look after her, hang around with her, help her settle in, OK? Because she is going to need friends. Good friends. Friends she can rely on. I'll do what I can, but I can't be there for her all the time. She is going to need you. Have you got that?"

Both girls nodded.

"Good." said Marlie, releasing Ginny. "In that case, it's time we had breakfast. Come on, Lu." With that, she led all five of them into the Great Hall.

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Chapter Four The Debt of Fifteen Years Ago

Deanna and Rianne were going over their new timetables over breakfast. They looked up as Luella and Marlie joined them.

"Well?" asked Deanna gently. "What happened?"

"Ron found out." said Marlie wearily. "Bloody Malfoy turned up and told him. Then Ginny chose exactly the wrong moment to make an entrance."

Deanna and Rianne both winced.

"Is Ginny OK?" Rianne asked.

Luella looked down the table to where Lydia and Autumn were trying to comfort the youngest Weasley. "Not too good, but I think she'll recover. She's gone from crying her eyes out to sniffing, so that's an improvement."

"What about Ron?" asked Deanna.

"Being an idiot, as expected." sighed Marlie. "Publicly disowned her, won't even acknowledge her existence. Bloody hell, anyone would think she'd run off with Snape or something."

"What the hell is wrong with being a Slytherin anyway?" grumbled Rianne. "We're nice people most of the time!"

"Leave him." said Deanna wearily. "You know what Ron's like, always making snap judgements about people based on nothing more than his own petty prejudices."

"Terrible thing, that." said Marlie, beginning to grin. "Taking instant irrational dislikes to people for no reason at all. Good thing we're not like that, eh Ri?"

"Of course not, Marls." grinned Rianne. "That description doesn't fit anyone we know at all, does it?"

"All right, all right, point taken." said Deanna irritably. "Can I interest you lot in your new timetables? Snapey just brought them round."

Silence fell as Luella and Marlie reached for their timetables and studied them. Marlie gave a little squeal of delight.

"Ooh, we've got Defence Against the Dark Arts first thing!"

Deanna, normally one to be pleased by this piece of information, just rolled her eyes. "Hmm. Marlie, with Gilderoy Lockhart teaching it, it may not live up to your expectations."

Marlie looked indignant. "There is nothing wrong with Gilderoy Lockhart! Just because your mother's taken against him for some petty reason of her own."

"She has not taken against him for some petty reason of her own, she has taken against him because he's an incompetent and patronising moron." said Deanna patiently. "Lu, Ri, back me up here."

"She's right." Rianne said coolly. "If he's ever taken on a werewolf in his life, I'll eat Barney."

Marlie sniffed. "Huh. Well, I think he's wonderful."

Deanna groaned. "Oh dear gods, Marlie, you do not fancy Lockhart, surely?" Marlie didn't answer, blushing and squirming. Deanna held her head in her hands.

"My life, this is going to be a fun year, isn't it? Marlie fancying Lockhart, Rianne lusting after Snape."

"I do not fancy Professor Snape!" Rianne snapped. Deanna ignored her.

"Just leaves Luella." Deanna said, engaged in full rant mode. "Why don't you develop a crush on Hagrid, Lu, make it a hat-trick?"

Luella laughed. "I don't think so, Dee. Can't stand men with beards."

Deanna sighed with relief. "Well, at least one of my friends has some sense. Seeing as we're on the topic of Snapey anyway, when is Potions?"

Rianne scanned her timetable. "Last lesson today."

"Cool." Deanna said. "It'll be nice to get back in to things again."

All three of them turned to stare at her in shock. Rianne scratched her ear.

"My hearing must be going. I thought for a minute that I heard Tyler say she was looking forward to Potions."

"You heard it too!" Marlie exclaimed. "Thank the gods for that, I thought I'd suddenly Apparated into the Twilight Zone or something."

"I didn't know you liked Potions, Deanna." Luella grinned. "In fact, I seem to remember you saying it wasn't proper magic."

Deanna shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "Well, you know. It's not so bad. Quite interesting when you get into it. And fun too - you never have to worry about anyone's work blowing up the classroom in Flitwick's lesson."

Marlie and Rianne were staring at her, unable to believe what they were hearing.

"Deanna, you mean to tell me you actually like Potions?" Rianne stared in disbelief. Deanna didn't answer.

"Bloody hell, Tyler, you'll be telling us next that Professor Snape's not such a bad bloke after all, and that he's quite nice when you get to know him." commented Marlie.

"Well, he is." muttered Deanna. "He's always been pretty good to me."

Marlie shot to her feet, drawing her wand. "All right! Out with it!" she demanded. "What have you done with the real Deanna Tyler??"

Luella decided to save her friend from potential embarrassment. After all, Deanna's new found warmth towards Snape and the reasoning behind it was far too personal to be shared.

"Marlie, relax." Luella laughed. "Can't you tell? The answer's perched on her shoulder. She's so easily bribed, is our Tyler." She indicated Nestra, who was preening herself.

Marlie sat down again. "That's all right then. You had me worried for a minute there, DT. Thought you might be going soft on us."

Deanna laughed. "No danger of that! Just that Snapey's not so bad, really. I really should make a bit more of an effort at that subject, it could come in useful one day." Not to mention making Snape proud of me, she added mentally, glancing hopefully at her Potions master. He was calmly eating his breakfast, gazing into space. His eyes travelled aimlessly along the Slytherin table, until they came to rest on her. For a moment, their eyes met. Snape's normal scowl melted into a genuine smile. Deanna found herself grinning in return, as a rush of emotion took over. Her conversation with Luella back in August came to mind again. Why couldn't it have been you, she thought fiercely. Why couldn't you and Mum have fallen in love and got married? It would have been cool, growing up with you as a father. I don't think I ever would have worried about having to fend for myself if you'd been there. I don't think I would have been afraid of anything with you there.

Deanna turned away and rubbed her eyes, blinking back the urge to cry. Stop that, she told herself. Marlie's right, you are getting soft. Avoiding looking at Snape, she turned her attention determinedly to her breakfast.

By the time breakfast had finished, Ginny had recovered enough to go to classes. This was a good thing, not least because her first lesson was Potions. Ginny recalled Ron, Fred and George talking about Snape, saying how he was easily the most feared and hated teacher in the school, and shivered. This man was now her House Head? She just hoped it was true what Ron said about him favouring Slytherins.

"So what's Professor Snape like?" she asked Autumn.

"A sarcastic bastard, to quote my brother." grinned Autumn. "But he's all right really. You just have to watch your step and not get on the wrong side of him."

"He always favours us anyway." said Lydia. "Don't worry, Gin. You'll be fine. Remember, you're a Slyth. He won't pick on you. If he does, get your friend Marlie Lovegood to have a word with Deanna Tyler. Apparently he favours her and Lu Martin even more than most of us."

"Does he?" Ginny asked, beginning to cheer up.

"Oh yes." Lydia nodded. "No one's really sure why though. The most popular theory is that he's trying to get under her mother's cloak."

Ginny shrieked with laughter. "He's not!"

"He is!" grinned Autumn.

"Now that's never been proven." said Lydia. "But she's his age, single, attractive, charming, rich and able to kill you before she's even stopped talking to you. Can't blame him for fancying her, can you?"

"Well, no, but..." Ginny thought back over everything she'd ever heard about Caitlin Tyler. While there was no doubt that Caitlin Tyler was very attractive, she was also, in Ginny's mind, absolutely terrifying. Her parents had always spoken about her in hushed, pitying tones, as if something was wrong with her, as if she was some kind of invalid. There was that story of Deanna's, about how she'd taken her six year old daughter round the worst bits of Knockturn Alley to frighten her off wanting anything to do with the place. And when she'd seen her in action, breaking up the fight between Lucius Malfoy and her father, she'd seemed like some cold avenging angel. Yes, she was pretty, but there was a harsh expression on her face and in her eyes that made her look older than she actually was. She couldn't imagine anyone loving her, although you had to respect her.

Autumn nudged her in the side. "Quiet, both of you. Here he comes!"

Professor Snape strode down the corridor, his usual bored and cynical mask in place. Barely looking at them, he opened the door and walked in. The class filed in, no one saying a word.

Ginny, Lydia and Autumn settled themselves at the back of the class, in the same seats that, unknown to them, Fred, George and Marlie inhabited during their Potions classes. Ginny looked at him for the first time. So that was Professor Snape. Ron had been right - he didn't look friendly. Stern and forbidding, with black eyes that looked as if they could penetrate right to your very soul, Professor Snape exuded an air of cold aggression that stopped any potential trouble in its tracks. Ginny decided that it would definitely not be a good idea to get up to any mischief in his lessons.

He began by taking the register, starting with the Ravenclaw students, before moving on to the Slytherins. All proceeded normally at first, with Snape making the odd comment along the lines of "Another Montague, I see." or "I remember your cousin, let's hope you do as well as he did." Snape read out Lydia's name, commenting on her older siblings, before moving on to the last name on the register.

"Miss Virginia Weasley - what?" His eyes shot open as he looked at the register again. Ginny remembered that he'd not been present at the Sorting and presumably had not noticed her at breakfast. He mustn't have been told the news yet.

"A Weasley? In Slytherin?" he asked in wonder. Ginny stifled the urge to giggle.

"Here, sir." she said in what she hoped was a combination of matter-of-fact nonchalance and proper respect for a teacher. Snape looked her straight in the eyes, alive with curiosity, and clearly dying to ask all sorts of questions. However, he restrained himself, and merely gave her the same knowing look that Lydia had given her the night before.

"Now that's something I didn't expect." he said, amused. "You are the younger sister of Percy, Frederick, George and Ronald, are you not?"

"Yes, sir." Ginny said calmly. This was rather easy, she reflected. Hiding your emotions and maintaining an unruffled exterior really wasn't as difficult as she'd thought.

"Daughter of Arthur and Molly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well, well. Wonders will never cease. Welcome to Slytherin, Miss Weasley. May you achieve your ambitions. It will be... interesting... having you as a member. Yes, very interesting indeed." he mused, almost to himself. He seemed to shake off the thought, and turned his attention back to teaching.

"Well, someone's made quite an impression, haven't they?" teased Lydia as the lesson got underway. However, her tone of voice was not an unkind one.

"Stop it." said Ginny. "It's not my fault I got Sorted into the opposite house everyone expected. I can't help it if I stand out from the crowd." She shook her head in her best prima donna impersonation.

Lydia and Autumn looked impressed. "By Hera, I think she's got it." said Lydia.

"You're right, Lydia, she's got the Slytherin arrogance mastered already. Gin, you're a marvel."

"A true Slytherin. Slytherin Ginny." said Lydia, playing with words. "Ginny the Slyth. All Hail Ginny, the Weasley of Slytherin!"

"Ginny the Slytherin Weasley." said Ginny, half to herself. "I like that!" She looked around the classroom, starting to smile. She could get to like it here, she decided. Yes, she could definitely get to like being Slytherin.

As Ginny was getting to grips with the rudiments of Potions, the Slytherin fourth years were all gathered outside the classroom that had once been Professor Quirrell's and was now Gilderoy Lockhart's, waiting for Defence Against the Dark Arts to start. And the main, indeed the only, topic of conversation was Lockhart.

"What do you reckon he'll be like?" Alex Lynch asked curiously.

"Don't know." Chris Bryant said. "But he sounds brilliant! I mean, all the things he's done, taking on banshees, werewolves, vampires, all sorts! It'll be so cool hearing about all that."

"I doubt it." Lucas Vetinari and Rianne both said at the same time. They looked at each other, raised eyebrows and grinned. "You first." Rianne said. Lucas laughed.

"OK then. All very well Lockhart having done all that, but it's all a bit Mitchie Miggs, isn't it? All rather Action Wizard. I mean, really, how often in our lives are we going to be facing a pack of werewolves armed with nothing but a shoelace and a twig?"

"Never, werewolves are solitary animals." Deanna responded.

"Exactly. My father reckons it's a good read, but rather impractical. What do you think, Rianne?"

"My father thinks he's wonderful, which just goes to show." Rianne commented dryly. "Typical Gryffindors. I got to meet Lockhart over the holidays and I can't say I was impressed. Rather full of himself, and completely clueless to anyone else's feelings. His only redeeming feature was that it wasn't deliberate."

Winter Montague snorted. "So he's stupid rather than deliberately irritating. Hate to tell you this, Stormer, but that's not a good thing."

"Oh, leave him alone!" snapped Marlie. "I'm sure he'll be an excellent teacher. He must know heaps!"

"Yeah?" Chris asked. "So what does your mum think of him then?" Marlie blushed and shuffled uncomfortably.

"She hit the roof when I told her he was going to be teaching us." she muttered. "Had to go and have a lie down. Then rushed off to work, claiming she had to chair an emergency crisis meeting and send an owl or two."

The other Slytherins laughed. Lucas turned to Deanna. "Well, that makes two top Aurors against. What about the other best known one? What does the notorious Caitlin Tyler make of it all? After all, her career's been as action-packed as his."

"Put it this way." Deanna said delicately. "When she heard the news, she immediately bought the four of us the entire contents of Flourish and Blott's Anti-Dark arts section, and is even now writing an alternative syllabus for us. Must be one of the few witches in the country who doesn't think his appointment is a good idea."

"Smart lady." Alex commented. "Do you agree with her, Tyler?"

"I'm reserving judgement until I've had some lessons. I mean, I took an instant dislike to Snapey, but now I've got to know him a bit, I don't think he's so bad. So I don't want to be too hasty." Deanna said thoughtfully. "However, I have my doubts. My mother's professional judgement is rarely wrong."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the man himself, resplendent in lurid purple robes with lilac trim. Marlie immediately began simpering in a most unSlytherin way. The rest of them were less impressed.

"Greetings, children!" he beamed. "Shall we go in?" He opened the door and they all filed in after him, sitting down.

Lockhart looked at them all, grinning merrily. "Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts! I am Gilderoy Lockhart, your new professor, but I'm sure you all knew that! Especially if any of your mothers are familiar with that estimable publication, Witch Weekly." Again, the smile. It was not returned by anyone except Marlie. Lockhart didn't appear to notice.

"I notice from the register that we have some children whose parents are also noted fighters of Dark Arts. Chief Prosecutor Marcus Vetinari's son, Head of the DDAE and Auror Training Co-ordinator Melissa Lovegood's daughter, and the daughter of the witch who is as talented as she is beautiful, the lovely Caitlin Tyler, Commander of the Aurors and Deputy Head of the DDAE." He smiled widely at Deanna, who was staring right back at him, eyes wide in shock. Luella hoped it stayed that way, because when the shock wore off, Deanna would not be in a good mood. Lockhart was continuing.

"All very skilled mages, I don't doubt. However, although I've nothing against any of them, it's been a long while since they've been out there in the field, so to speak. I am here to show you the skills and qualities you'll need to take on the worst the world can throw at you."

Luella hardly dared look at Deanna. When she did, her fears were confirmed. Shock had given way to a look of absolute fury. "My mother could have you in a fight any time, anywhere, Gilderoy!" she hissed savagely under her breath.

Lockhart continued, oblivious to the looks ranging from boredom to hatred that the Slytherins were giving him. Luella wondered idly whether Lockhart was brave or just incredibly dense.

"Right then!" he rubbed his hands gleefully. "Let's get started! We'll start with how I defeated the Werewolf of Warsaw in 1984. I think we'll do this as a little role-play. Let's see. I need a volunteer."

As one, all the Slytherins immediately sunk slowly down in their seats, staring at their desks, each of them willing him not to choose them. The only one not trying to hide was Marlie, who was sitting up, practically bursting with enthusiasm, waving her hand wildly in the air.

However, her efforts were in vain. Lockhart didn't even notice her. Instead, his eyes fell on Deanna. Deanna, cursing having met his eyes for even a brief moment, slid ever further down into her chair. Too late.

"Miss Tyler!" Lockhart called out jovially. "Why don't you help me out?" Deanna, crimson with embarrassment, got up and made her way reluctantly to the front, her classmates grinning with joy at seeing someone else getting singled out. Luella gave her friend a look of sympathy.

"Right, now, you can be the werewolf, while I'll be me. This is how it all started..." Lockhart proceeded to regale them with the tale of how he'd been called in to fight off the werewolf threatening a village, before making a seething Deanna assist him with re-enacting the final battle.

Finally, Deanna was allowed to crawl with embarrassment back to her seat. Luella gave her a hug as she slid furiously back into her chair.

"He's dead, Lu." Deanna hissed with rage. "I swear it, Lu, his days are bloody numbered!" She glared murderously at her teacher, who, thankfully, didn't notice.

"Any questions?" asked Lockhart. Rianne glanced at Deanna, grinned evilly, winked at her and raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Stormosi?"

"Sir, given that werewolves have the strength of ten humans and that a bite from one will spread the curse, was it not perhaps unwise to engage in a bout of wrestling with it?"

Lockhart fell silent. "Ah, yes, well, Miss Stormosi, good question, I mean to say..." He faltered. Lucas, cottoning on all too swiftly to Rianne's plan, put his own hand up. "Yes, Vetinari?" Lockhart asked, rather relieved to be able to change the subject.

"Sir, why did you use an ordinary knife against it? Would you not have been better off using a silver one?" he asked innocently.

Lockhart stared at his class, a hint of panic in his eyes. All of them were giving him the same earnest look of attentiveness. Luella stifled the desire to laugh. This looked like being fun. She raised her own hand.

"Sir," she said earnestly, "why did you choose the night of the full moon? Wouldn't you have been better off hunting him at a different time of the month, while he was in human form and thus less dangerous?" She gave her most convincing thirsting-for-knowledge look.

Lockhart, his eyes darting wildly from one patient face to the next, seemed to come to a decision.

"Yes, well, very good all of you for managing to spot the deliberate mistakes. Five points each to Mr. Vetinari, Miss Martin and Miss Stormosi. Now for your

homework." He proceeded to set them an essay on the relevant chapter in *Gadding with Ghouls*, before hastily dismissing them.

The Slytherins filed out, grins on their faces. Deanna turned gratefully to Rianne, Luella and Lucas.

"Thank you." she said. "You three were wonderful. Did you see the look on his face?" she laughed.

"Any time, Tyler." grinned Rianne. "He who is so unwise as to make a Slytherin take part in a role-play against their will should be made to suffer."

"Plus it's fun." added Lucas. "Come on Stormer, let's go and plan what we can do to him next lesson!" Rianne laughed, and sauntered off with him, speculating what he'd be likely to set them next time.

Marlie was far less amused. "What were you thinking of, embarrassing poor Professor Lockhart like that?" she fumed.

"Er... because he started it by picking on me?" Deanna volunteered.

"Picking on you??" Marlie snapped. "I'd've loved to have been chosen!" Deanna and Luella rolled their eyes.

"Lighten up, Marls." Luella said. "We were just having a little joke. Honestly, you're normally well up for things like that. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!" snapped Marlie. She turned. "I'm going to talk to him and apologise for you lot. Honestly, I'm ashamed to be Slytherin, what must he think of us?" She stormed off in a huff. Deanna turned to Luella and shrugged.

"Well, at least it'll guarantee her getting the drama queen role she so clearly wants. Honestly, Lu, I knew love was blind, but I didn't know it was deaf, dumb and stupid too."

"She'll get over it." Luella said comfortingly. "Come on, this is Marlie we're talking about here. There are children's paddling pools with more depth than her. This time next year, it'll be another pretty face who she's declaring everlasting love for. You just wait."

"I hope so." Deanna sighed. "I sincerely hope so."

Professor Severus Snape watched his fourth year Potions class file in and sit down. Under most circumstances, the thought of being about to teach another class of uninspiring and bored students would have caused him to sink into his most cynical mood. But this was no ordinary class.

His keen eyesight picked them out almost immediately. Inseparable, inspirational, unmistakable. Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. Luella with her lively, bewitching, silver-blue eyes, dark brown hair cascading around a face that would one day have men falling at her feet, friendly, compassionate, kind and gentle, yet with a quick wit and fierce intelligence that could leave the unwary wondering what on earth had just happened to them. And next to her, Deanna with her flowing raven locks, sharp features, proud expression that said all too clearly "Don't mess", piercing black eyes, and a personality you could not ignore, all masking a tenderness and kind heart that would leave most stunned if they ever saw it. She wasn't conventionally pretty like Luella was shaping up to be, but Severus had no doubts whatsoever that she too would one day command as much male attention as her friend, from sheer force of personality alone. Of course, none of them would ever be good enough for her, but it would be amusing watching her break their hearts nonetheless. He couldn't help smiling at both girls. Both so special in their own way, both so, well, wonderful.

The lesson proceeded normally enough. However, Severus couldn't help noticing how attentive Deanna was being. Normally, although she didn't exactly misbehave, she usually looked bored out of her skull. Today, however, she actually seemed to be listening. And her potion, normally nothing special, was as good as anything Rianne Stormosi could come up with. Was it possible that Deanna Tyler was actually putting some effort in? The thought warmed his heart.

At length, he dismissed the class and began to go through their newly handed in assignments. He heard the door closing behind the last of them and settled down to get on with some marking. Until a shape hovering near his desk distracted him.

He looked up sharply. And relaxed on seeing Deanna standing there.

"Miss Tyler. Hello again." he smiled. Deanna slid into a chair opposite him, and smiled back, the expression lighting up her face. Severus revised his earlier opinion on Deanna not being conventionally pretty. That smile could melt hearts from a hundred paces, he thought. Must have inherited it from her mother.

"Hello sir." she said, slightly nervous, but unable to stop smiling.

"Can I help you with something, Miss Tyler?" Severus asked goodnaturedly, if a little confused at her presence.

Deanna shifted a little. "Well, no, not really. I just came to see how you were doing."

Severus raised an eyebrow, fighting back the urge to grin like an idiot. "Most touching. Why?"

Deanna blushed. Staring at the desk, she mumbled "Because..." She stopped, trying to pick her words. At length, she looked up at him. "I've not seen you since June. I missed you." She immediately dropped her eyes. Severus felt that warm fuzzy feeling start enveloping him again.

"I've missed you too." he said softly. Deanna looked up in surprise. She was still blushing, but that rarely seen infectious smile was back.

For a while they did nothing but look at each other, just gazing into each other's eyes. Severus realised what a fool he must look like, but didn't care. Anything for Deanna's attention, anything at all.

Deanna broke eye contact first, laughing merrily, sounding exactly like Caitlin had done in more innocent days. "I'm sorry." she laughed. "Gods, I can't believe I told you that. Can't believe I'm even here. I'd better go." She made to leave.

"Wait." Severus said. "Don't go. Stay here for a while. I like your company."

Deanna sat down again. "Really?"

"Yes, really. And if I may, I'd like the opportunity to enjoy it for a while, just for once not needing to advise, counsel or discipline you."

"OK." Deanna said, surprised but pleased. "Were you pleased with my potion then?" she asked, grinning.

"I was very impressed. I had no idea you were so talented. And you were paying attention as well, I noticed. What did I do to deserve all this?" he said, not unkindly.

Deanna met his gaze, all traces of shyness fading. "You listened to me." she said quietly. "And you've never ever embarrassed me. You're a good teacher, you know. Lu was right about you." Her expression changed. "Unlike that tosser Lockhart."

"Language, Deanna." Severus said mildly.

"Well he is!" Deanna protested. "Do you know what he had me doing?"

"What did he have you doing?" Severus asked, beginning to grin.

"He had me taking part in a role-play!" Deanna fumed. "A friggin' role-play! With him! In front of everyone! I've never been so humiliated in all my life!" She gazed furiously at Severus. "The man deserves to die."

Severus winced. "You poor, poor child! Never mind, my dear. I am sure you and your friends will be able to devise a fitting revenge. The usual caveats apply - I don't want to know about it, I don't want any evidence connecting it with you."

Deanna grinned. "Well, Lu, Ri and Lucas sorted out House honour there and then." She proceeded to explain how the three of them had managed to make Lockhart squirm. Severus laughed out loud.

"Ah, I'm so proud of them. The Class of '96 is going to be one of those vintage years for Slytherin, I can feel it now. Incidentally, Professor McGonagall did the timetabling. And I believe she gave Lockhart your class as his first one not long after he'd roguishly told her how easy Animagism had been to learn, how he was surprised more people didn't have the ability, he'd found it no trouble, and if she ever needed any help with her Transfiguration research, all she had to do was ask."

It was now Deanna's turn to laugh. "It's not just me, is it? He *is* systematically putting everyone's back up, isn't he?"

"It would seem so." Severus said calmly. "Oddly enough, he has yet to really bother me. Evidently even he is not that stupid."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Deanna observed. "Don't speak too soon, you could well be next. Now you getting your revenge on him, that'd be interesting to see. He's already managed to upset Mum, you two could work together on stitching him up."

"Deanna, stop trying to incite me into doing something that would no doubt land both me and your mother in a lot of trouble. Although I've no doubt it would be well worth it."

Deanna laughed. "Oh, it would, I'm sure." She recalled why she was there in the first place. "Actually, sir, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

Severus felt his good mood begin to evaporate. "Oh yes." he said, settling himself for trouble. "What is it? I hope you're not planning anything against the school rules."

"Oh no." said Deanna. "It's about Ginny. You know, Ginny Weasley. Fred and George's sister."

"Ah, the notorious Miss Weasley. I had the pleasure of meeting her this morning. I had no idea she was in Slytherin. Aren't all her family Gryffindor?"

"They are. That's the problem." Deanna said, turning serious.

"Problem?" asked Severus.

"She's grown up thinking of herself as a Gryffindor, among Gryffindors. She's got no idea how to go about being one of us. And we're a bit worried about how she's going to find it here. Which is why the four of us had a little meeting last night. We've decided to look out for her, make sure she's OK."

"Very noble of you. However, she seems on friendly enough terms with Miss Vetinari and Miss Montague. I am sure she will cope. After all, if the Hat put her in Slytherin, she must have some potential." said Severus, beginning to relax now he wasn't actually going to have to get involved.

"Well, yes, but until she can develop all that potential, she's going to need help, isn't she? Which is where you come in."

Severus felt his heart sink. "What do you want me to do, Deanna?"

"Nothing, really. We just want you to keep an eye on her, make sure she's OK. We were a bit worried that..." Deanna paused, wondering how to phrase this without offending her notoriously volatile House Master. Severus watched her, intrigued despite himself, waiting for her to finish her sentence.

"We just wanted to make sure that you didn't treat her any differently than the rest of the Slytherins." Deanna said, avoiding her teacher's eyes. "We just wanted to make sure you saw her as a Slytherin rather than a Weasley, if you get my drift."

She looked up. To her relief, far from being angry, he was actually smiling.

"You wanted to make sure I refrained from being overly sarcastic towards her, isn't that right? Touching. Very diplomatic way of putting it, by the way, I'm quite impressed."

"Thank you, sir." Deanna mumbled.

"No trouble. Allow me to lay your fears to rest. Miss Weasley struck me as quite a charming young lady, not at all like her troublemaking and obnoxious brothers. In your capable hands, I am quite sure she will mature into a fine young example of Slytherin at its finest. Have no fear, I don't intend to be harsh towards her unless her behaviour should merit it. Never let it be said that I treat my Slytherins badly."

"No, just everyone else in the school." said Deanna, grinning.

Severus shrugged. "I've no responsibility to the other students except to teach them Potions. They don't interest me - so predictable, most of them. Slytherins, on the other hand, with the possible exceptions of Messrs Crabbe and Goyle, are as fascinating and varied as cloud formations, each one a marvel in their own way. I wouldn't be Head of any other House if I had the choice. You and your housemates never fail to challenge, amuse and surprise me with each passing day. I daresay you teach me as much as I'm meant to teach you."

Deanna inclined her head. "Didn't you once say I was everything a Slytherin should be?"

"I believe so. And it's still true." Severus said, looking deep into her eyes. My daughter, he thought proudly. My wonderful, beautiful daughter. He felt a surge of paternal pride rush through him, watching her there, blushing but smiling happily. "Deanna Tyler, it is still so very true."

So it was that Severus was in a better than usual mood as he settled down in the Hogwarts staff room. Minerva McGonagall noticed at once, and took a seat next to him.

"You're in a rather cheery mood, Severus. What's happened?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Severus said, grinning. "By the way, Minerva, may I just congratulate you on giving Gilderoy the Slytherin fourth year as his first class. A stroke of genius, I must say. They managed to find no less than three different things wrong with his account of how he defeated the Werewolf of Warsaw, and I'm positive it would have been more if Lockhart had let them continue. Excellent work, Minerva."

McGonagall tried not to laugh. "This is what happens when I get caught in a moment of weakness. And he did say he wanted a challenge."

"And you don't get much more challenging than a class with Deanna Tyler in it." Severus mused. He noticed the expression on Professor McGonagall's face change to one of abject misery. "Minerva? What's wrong... oh." He felt his good mood evaporate as Lockhart came bounding over to their table, a huge smile plastered all over his face.

"Hello, Minerva! And Severus!" he beamed, slapping them both on the back. "Just the man I was looking for!"

Severus gritted his teeth. "What is it, Gilderoy?"

"I just had the pleasure of teaching some of your pupils this morning. The Slytherin fourth year. Such cheeky little scamps, aren't they?" he grinned. Severus fought back the urge to punch him.

"If you say so, Gilderoy." he said shortly.

Lockhart didn't appear to notice Severus's irritation.

"That young daughter of Caitlin Tyler's is quite the feisty one, isn't she?" Lockhart continued blithely. "So like her mother at the same age. I predict she'll be quite skilled at fighting the Dark Arts when she's older. She just needs a little tuition from the likes of me, and to learn her limits. Overconfidence in her abilities, that could break the young lady if she's not careful."

Severus couldn't help wondering if Lockhart had noticed the irony in that last sentence.

"I'm sure her mother has schooled her well in knowledge of Defence Against the Dark Arts." he said, bristling.

"Yes, Caitlin Tyler's hardly the type to neglect that aspect of her child's upbringing." McGonagall said primly.

Lockhart smiled indulgently. "Even a witch as talented and charming as the lovely Caitlin Tyler has room for improvement. I met her in Diagon Alley only this summer, and I was saying to her then how if the DDAE needed any help, all they had to do was ask. Seemed quite grateful for the offer."

"Grateful?" Severus asked quietly, too quietly. Professor McGonagall looked nervously from one man to the other, recognising the look on Severus's face all too well.

"Oh yes." beamed Lockhart. "She seemed rather disappointed that I wouldn't be available for longer. I did say that I would only be able to do a few weeks, and she looked positively depressed."

Severus tightened his grip on his coffee mug. "Depressed?" he hissed.

"Certainly saddened. You know, I think I made quite an impression on her. Such an adorable lady, so sweet and charming. Do you think she'd object to seeing me again?" Lockhart asked hopefully.

Severus slammed his mug down on the table, almost overcome by the urge to grab Lockhart by the throat and smash his face through the nearest window. McGonagall reacted immediately, hastily grabbing his arm.

"Leave it, Severus." she whispered in his ear. Lockhart continued, blithely unaware of Severus's reaction.

"You know, the more I think about it, the better it sounds! The Ministry's most glamorous Auror, and the world's best-looking and most famous fighter of Dark Arts. I can see it now. The *Daily Prophet* would have a field day. Think of the photos! The publicity! We'd have the front page for weeks. I just hope Ms. Tyler's not the jealous type, I do get a lot of fan mail from witches. But I'm sure she'd be more than accommodating, if it meant being Mrs. Gilderoy Lockhart!" He sighed romantically. "Is she attached, do either of you two know?"

Severus's coffee mug exploded, sending the contents flying everywhere. McGonagall took in Severus clutching the arms of his chair, knuckles white, face twisted with rage, and swiftly intervened before Severus's self-control snapped.

"I think she's quite happy being single at the moment, Gilderoy." she said, not taking her eyes off Severus.

Lockhart sighed. "True, true. But if she knew I was interested..." He got up. "I'm going to owl her, see if she'd be interested in doing anything. Thank you, Minerva, Severus, you've been most encouraging! Just for that, I'll make sure you get the best seats at the wedding!" He beamed at them both, oblivious to the looks Severus was giving him, and left.

McGonagall hardly dared look at Severus. He was glaring at the departing Lockhart, and McGonagall could only reflect that it was a good thing Avada Kedavra couldn't be cast through the eyes alone. Finally, he turned back to her, his eyes blazing wrathfully.

"How *dare* he?" he snarled. "How can he possibly have the nerve to think that Caitlin would ever look twice at him? She wouldn't even tolerate him crawling on his hands and knees for her, begging for her favours. Caitlin would not, would never, under any possible circumstances, be interested in him!" He paused, jealous rage giving way to a sudden insecurity. "She wouldn't, would she?"

"I'm sure she wouldn't, Severus. She's got far too much sense to be swayed by good looks and charm alone." McGonagall said primly.

Severus was not convinced. Visions of Caitlin on Lockhart's arm, gazing up at him adoringly, were suddenly forcing themselves upon him. "There's some very intelligent

witches of far more experience than her who've fallen for him." he said shortly. "And she's been single for so long... Dear gods, suppose she fell for him in a moment of weakness?" He looked at Professor McGonagall in horror.

"Severus!" she snapped. "Unless Caitlin Tyler's character has changed radically since she was at school, which I doubt from what I've heard, she is unlikely to entertain any sentimental feelings for him. Far more chance of her just wanting a physical relationship out of him."

Severus's jaw dropped in shock. "What??" he almost screamed. For some reason, the thought of Caitlin having random, meaningless sex with Lockhart disturbed him more than the idea of her being in love with him. He shot to his feet. "Right! That does it! I'm going over there! I'm going to see for myself. She can't, she mustn't, she doesn't want any kind of relationship with Gilderoy Lockhart! She just can't!" He stormed out of the staff room. McGonagall sighed, head in her hands. Severus always had been somewhat overprotective where Caitlin's love life had been concerned, even when he had been involved elsewhere (which hadn't been often, certainly he'd not been involved with anyone since he started teaching, but still), but she hadn't expected him to react this badly. She just hoped Caitlin Tyler was still as adept at dealing with an angry Severus as she used to be.

In and out. In and out. Easy does it, Caitlin thought to herself as she worked out in her home gym. These Muggle exercise things weren't that difficult really, not once you got used to them. The important thing was to establish a rhythm, and keep your concentration. As long as you stayed focused, you could keep this up indefinitely. As long as you weren't distracted...

There came a sudden series of bangs. Caitlin started with a shock, dropped the dumbbells she was using, and shrieked in pain as the weights twisted her arm painfully. Again that banging, and now a voice, a man's voice.

"Caitlin! Caitlin, I know you're in there. Let me in, we need to talk." Caitlin recognised the voice as that of Severus Snape, and he did not sound happy. Cursing furiously under her breath and rubbing her arm, she wrapped a towel around her shoulders, picked up her wand and strode purposefully to the front door.

No sooner had she opened the door than Severus pushed past her and walked straight into her front room. Caitlin followed him, too surprised that he'd invaded her inner sanctum like this to be angry at him.

"Severus, what on earth...?"

"Is it true?" he snarled at her. "Well? Is it?"

"Is what true?" she asked, bewildered.

"You and... and... Lockhart!" He spat the name at her in fury. "He says that you're interested in him! Are you?" He glared at her.

Caitlin felt the shock begin to wear off, to be replaced with a slow burning anger. "Me? Interested in Lockhart? Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Who else?" Severus snapped.

"Me and Lockhart?" Caitlin stared in disbelief. "Severus, there is no one I am less attracted to than Gilderoy Lockhart! How on earth you could possibly think for a second that I would see anything in him is beyond me! I'd rather go out with Lucius Malfoy than Lockhart. In fact, come to think of it, I'd rather go out with *you* than Gilderoy Lockhart." Caitlin felt positively disgusted at the thought

"So... you're not going to be dating him then." Severus said uncertainly.

"No." Caitlin said firmly.

"No wedding pictures special in *Witch Weekly*?"

"No."

"What about some random meaningless sex?"

"Severus, I've told you before, I'm not sleeping with you."

"Not me! Him!"

"No chance, I don't need the hate mail!" Caitlin laughed. She gazed coolly at Severus, who was now looking rather sheepish. It suddenly occurred to her what had prompted his little visit. "Why, Severus," she purred softly. "can it be you're jealous?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "No." he said, unconvincingly. Caitlin smiled, a hungry predatory smile, replete with the knowledge of one closely attuned to her prey's every feeling, every thought. All of a sudden, the balance of power appeared to have shifted decisively in her favour. He's jealous! she thought. Jealous as hell, and doesn't want to admit it. Because he's not my lover and there's absolutely nothing he can do about it. Ah, Sevi, Sevi, Sevi, is this what love has brought you to? She continued to gaze at him, suddenly finding herself aroused, very aroused. Aroused by the power she realised she had over him. She moved that little bit closer, enjoying his discomfiture immensely.

"Liar." she murmured. "You just can't help yourself, can you? You can tolerate me not wanting you, but you can't stomach for one minute the idea of me wanting someone else, can you? You men, you're all the same. You had this idea of me as some shell-shocked little victim, too traumatised to want anyone, and still hopelessly in love with you, didn't you? What, did you think I'd been living like a nun all this time? I've had my fair share of love affairs, let me tell you. Even with a child. Motherhood didn't kill my sex drive, you know! I just had to be rather more discreet with my love life, that's all. Deanna never knew. All those missions that required me to be away from home? Most were genuine, but not all. And there's a whole host of young male Aurors who had their first initiations into the Arts of Love from yours truly."

"Caitlin, if you're trying to impress me with tales of your sexual prowess, stop it." Severus said through gritted teeth. "I'm well aware men can't stop themselves wanting you. I'm just saddened that you were that insecure that you needed constant proof of the fact."

"Or just jealous that you weren't getting any." said Caitlin, taking full advantage of knowing that he'd been celibate for the best part of a decade.

Severus tried to remain dignified. "I chose to abstain, Caitlin. It wasn't forced on me. For some strange reason, I'd had enough. I needed peace and solitude, Hogwarts provided it. So don't try and make me feel guilty for not playing the whore like you evidently were." Anger tinged his words, but it was underlaid by a feeling of woundedness, hurt that she'd not saved herself for him, as he had for her. But then, he reflected, are you really surprised?

Caitlin drew in her breath, her eyes glittering with cold. Without a word, she reached back and hit him, hard.

Severus watched her fist flying towards him in slow motion. Now that could be painful, he thought idly. The blow connected with force, sending him sprawling to the floor, agony exploding into his soul as his skull collided with the wrought-iron fireplace. I was right, he thought. It was. He tasted blood, and felt liquid running down his face. See, Caitlin? he wanted to scream at her. I'm giving my life-blood for you. Are you happy now? Are you?

Caitlin stood there, watching him, somehow managing to combine the curiosity of a child and the malice of someone old beyond their years.

"What's the matter, Sevi?" she chanted in a terrifying singsong voice. "Are you hurt?"

"Most perceptive, Tyler." Severus snarled at her. "Are you satisfied yet, or shall we both carry on with the who-can-wound-the-deepest game?"

Caitlin laughed and dropped to the floor, bringing her face close to his.

"It's nice to see you haven't lost your ability to come up with the smart remarks when your back's up against the wall. Hold onto it, you'll need those one-liners in the future. They are so wonderful at keeping the rest of the world out, aren't they?"

"Get to the point, Tyler. What is it that you want?"

"What do I want?" Caitlin asked thoughtfully. A grim smile crossed her lips. "Well, right now Sevi, I want some mindless physical gratification. Don't you?" She ran her fingers tenderly down his chest, feeling the power flow through her. All the time since we started talking again, it's been him chasing me, she thought. He's been the one with all the trump cards and I've been on the run. She smiled cruelly, enjoying the unexpected role reversal, getting a buzz out of watching Severus want her and not want her. Let's see how you like being the hunted one, she thought. Let's see!

"Why so afraid, Sevi? Don't tell me you've lost interest."

"It's not that." Severus said, his voice betraying more than a hint of fear. "It's just... here, now, it doesn't feel... It doesn't feel right." He backed away from her, afraid, very afraid, using a nearby armchair to haul himself back to his feet and put some kind of barrier between them. This wasn't the Caitlin he thought he knew, wasn't the Caitlin he'd thought about, fantasised about for so long.

"Doesn't feel right?" Caitlin laughed. "Severus, you have never lost the opportunity to try and seduce me. Never mind how I felt. Never mind that maybe the thought of having you anywhere near me made me feel physically ill."

"I'm sorry. Caitlin, I'm sorry, love. I really am." Severus pleaded in desperation. "I didn't do it to hurt you, I didn't want to humiliate you. I just wanted you near me. I just wanted..." He stopped, letting the feeling flow through him, tasting it before revealing it. "I just wanted you to love me."

Caitlin said nothing. For a moment, she almost looked sorry. Her eyes softened as something like pity crept in there.

Severus held his breath. Had she relented? Was he safe?

"So touching, Severus. So very, very touching." A bittersweet smile played across her lips. "You know, I'm rather glad you said that. It will make what I'm about to do all the more poignant."

Severus felt the hope drain out of him. Caitlin's tender mood had passed, and the playful dominatrix was back. She raised her wand.

"Dishabilius!"

Severus gasped as his robes fell from him. "Caitlin, what the hell...?" He tried desperately to cover himself. Caitlin just laughed. Jumping to her feet, she spun round and dealt him a high-kick to the face, catching him off-balance and sending him sprawling to the floor again.

Severus dared to look her in the eye. He immediately wished he hadn't. He'd seen that look before, but never in his life did he think he'd see it in Caitlin's eyes. It was that same cold, ruthless, ever-so-slightly insane look he'd seen in the eyes of his fellow Death Eaters when they'd tortured their victims. The same look he'd no doubt had when he'd torn lives apart in his turn. He never thought he'd be on the receiving end though.

"Caitlin, love." he pleaded. "Please. Don't do this. I'm begging you. Please."

Caitlin sneered, feeding off his helplessness, his vulnerability only heightening her arousal. "Touching. You look so cute when you're pleading for mercy. I must say, this torturing thing's rather amusing, isn't it? I'm not surprised you joined Voldemort, it is fun." She raised her wand. *"Crucio."*

Severus screamed in pain. Let it end, let it end! he thought as the pain sliced through his insides, twisting and turning them, setting him on fire, obliterating his whole world until there was nothing but the pain left to convince him he was still alive.

It faded, and the world came rushing back. Slowly, he uncurled from the foetal position he had no memory of assuming. It wasn't the first time he'd had that particular curse performed on him, but he didn't remember it hurting so much back then. He raised his eyes to look at Caitlin, and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. There were no words really.

"Ah, Severus, you suffer so prettily." Caitlin whispered hungrily. "It's as if you were born for me to torment." She gazed at him almost tenderly, exhilarating in the hurt and confusion on his face. "You know, you look so beautiful when you're hurting." She raised her wand again. "*Crucio*."

Had that last time been the most painful thing in the world? Ha! That had been nothing, Severus thought as the pain knifed through him again. Oddly enough, he felt strangely detached by this time, as if all this was happening to someone else. Someone else screaming, someone else thrashing around on Caitlin's Axminster.

The pain eased. Severus collapsed in exhaustion. He had just enough energy left to gaze unhappily up at her, his beautiful tormentor. She was standing over him now, cool and unmoved, and so heartrendingly seductive. I love you, he thought. Even when you're torturing me. Gods, how sick am I?

"Do you fear me?" Caitlin asked softly. Severus recalled the conversation, almost exactly a year ago, when he'd said the same thing to her. She'd denied it, but not convincingly. How things had changed.

"Yes." he whispered, each word taking it in turns to stab him in the heart as it forced its way into the world. "Yes, I'm terrified of you."

Caitlin laughed. "Smart enough to admit it at last, I see." Her gaze swept downwards. "And yet your own body's betraying you. So pathetic. So pathetic that even now, after all this, that you still want me. That you're still in love with me, after all this time."

Severus winced as she mockingly echoed his own words back to him. "All right, Caitlin, you've made your point." he said harshly. "Now give me back my robes and wand and let me go. I'll not bother you again."

Caitlin was no longer smiling. She was now looking at him very thoughtfully. "Have I, though?" she said to herself. "Have I really made my point?" Calmly, she raised her wand, her eyes cold and impassive. "*Petrificus Totalus*!"

Severus realised too late what she was going to do. The curse hit him before he could dodge it, causing his arms and legs to freeze to attention, leaving him vulnerable, helpless and entirely at her mercy.

Caitlin placed her wand to one side, dropped to her knees and crawled over to him in silence. Severus wished she'd taunt him again, the mockery had been infinitely

preferable. However, there was nothing he could do, absolutely nothing. She'd rendered him completely powerless. He couldn't even close his eyes to shut it out as Caitlin straddled him, never once taking her eyes off his, and began to execute a precise, brutal and above all, appropriate, revenge.

Severus lay there quietly, not wanting to move even though Caitlin had released him from the curse almost as soon as she'd finished. She'd rearranged her clothes, taken her wand, freed him, and walked out without a word or a backwards glance. She was now in the shower, no doubt wanting to cleanse herself of the taint his touch had evidently left on her.

Slowly, he reached for his robes and pulled them to him, after lying there for what seemed like forever. However, he didn't get dressed straight away. Right now, he was too stunned to do anything other than curl into a ball, clutching at his robes like some kind of security blanket. How could you, Cait? he thought miserably. How could you? But even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. She could do it because I did it to her first. I changed her from a fun-loving, carefree young woman into a cold, ruthless killing machine. That's how, he thought. Well, congratulations, Severus. Here's your reward.

Caitlin walked back in, fully dressed in the royal blue velvet robes that he'd always loved and which always suited her. Severus felt his heart break to look at her. Still so beautiful, he thought with a pang of desire. Why the hell can't I stop loving you?

She raised an eyebrow on seeing him there. "You still here?" she said. "I would have thought you'd be long gone by now." She walked over to the mirror above the fire, and began putting her earrings in. "You'd better hurry up, you know. I've got to go to work soon, I don't want you in here while I'm gone. Well?" She reached for a hairbrush and began running it through her hair. Severus picked himself up and numbly pulled his clothes back on.

Finally, he was done. He headed for the front door. As he reached the doorway to the hall, he stopped, compelled to look at Caitlin again, desperate for some kind of meaning, some kind of closure to the evening's events. She saw him in the mirror and turned to face him curiously.

For a moment, they just looked at each other, he with hurt and anguish, she just mildly surprised. Severus spoke first.

"Caitlin, why?" was all he could say.

Her face changed, and for the first time that evening, he saw something like hurt in her eyes.

"Because I wanted you to know what it felt like for me." she said softly.

"Well, congratulations Caitlin." Severus said roughly. "You've got your wish."

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Chapter Five The Redemption Starts Here

Screaming. Begging. Pleading. That was all she could hear. Just this voice, a voice she knew intimately, a voice she cared about but just couldn't place, begging for mercy, alternately screaming and sobbing.

"Don't hurt me, please. Please!" she could hear him crying.

"I won't hurt you!" she called out in desperation. "Where are you?"

He didn't seem to hear her. The screaming had stopped now, to be replaced with something more terrible, the sound of crying.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm so, so sorry."

"What for? It's all right, I'm here. Just tell me where you are, I'll help you." she said, fear rising within her. Dear god, was he all right? What had happened to him? She pushed through the darkness, trying to sense what direction the voice was coming from, desperately trying to find him. I've got to find him, she thought, got to. I'm the only one who can help, the only one who can heal him, if I don't reach him, something awful is going to happen.

The crying seemed to intensify. As if they were linked by some undefinable bond, she was hit by a wave of the most horrifying loneliness and despair she'd ever felt, the worst she could ever imagine feeling. Dear god, something terrible already *has* happened, she thought, panic beginning to set in. I've got to find him, please god, let him be all right, *let him be all right!*

The crying was getting fainter. I'm losing him, she thought in terror. Losing the connection. Don't leave me, don't leave me, please!

The sound died away and was gone. He was gone. Gone forever, into some silent hell of his own devising, suffering, beyond help now. She felt pain rake her own heart, a searing sense of loss and bereavement. Screaming his name (for she surely recognised him now; no other man had ever raised such depth of feeling in her), she sank sobbing to her knees.

Luella opened her eyes, blinking as her sight adjusted to the darkness. Reaching for her wand, she whispered the Lumos spell and looked about her. Safe in her own bed at Hogwarts, and unlike her last nightmare, no one moving around the dorm this time.

The thought brought her no relief. The sense of fear remained with her. The only consolation was that this time, it wasn't terror she was going to die. No, this was an altogether more intimate kind of fear; the fear that a loved one was in danger, had been hurt.

She wasn't so naive as to think that it had just been a dream. Slytherin Redeemers did not just have bad dreams. Getting up, she pushed back the curtains and checked on her friends.

Rianne was lying on her side, sleeping peacefully enough. Marlie was on her back, hair spread out all over the pillow, snoring blissfully. Deanna was practically hidden underneath her blankets, curled up in a ball, looking rather cute, although she would have been mortified to know that. Luella smiled and left them to their dreams. Hope they're nicer than mine, she thought.

She returned her attention back to the dream. All right, so the person in question probably wasn't dead. Even now she could still sense some kind of connection with him. Yes, he was alive. But in what sort of state? All she could feel was this empty, aching despair, this raw pain as if her very veins had been laid bare. A desperate, needing pain, crying out for love, crying out for healing. Crying out for her.

Not by name. But it was crying out for someone to help ease the pain, and she could hardly leave him to suffer.

She tried to recall the end of the dream, when she'd sunk to the floor screaming his name. Slipping away from her already, the memory of the name had faded like a ghost in sunlight. Who are you, she thought helplessly. How can I help you when I don't even know who you are?

Luella settled herself into Marlie's beanbag, absently petting Sooty as she leapt into her lap. Beginning to relax and focus her thoughts, she let her mind wander, seeking out this mysterious, troubled stranger. Where is he? Who is he? What do I do next? she mused to herself.

In the stillness of the night, a reply came to her. Seek out Professor Snape. Go to his office, find him, talk to him. If he is not there, wait for him. You are needed there tonight.

Luella got to her feet, and began to get dressed, pulling on jeans, t-shirt and a thick grey jumper to keep her from getting cold. Fastening her school cloak over the top to assist in concealing her, she cast a glamour around herself and set out.

Severus slipped silently into the Hogwarts Entrance Hall. It had been some hours now since he'd left Caitlin's. He'd walked into the night in a daze, and by some miracle had ended up flagging down the Knight Bus. The conductor, driver and passengers had given him the strangest looks, some of them even recognising him, but a typical Severus Snape glare had silenced them. Doing his best to ignore the curious stares, and the whispers along the lines of "Is that...?" "What's he doing round here?" and "What the hell happened to him?" that had broken out as soon as he'd curled up in one of the beds, he'd vainly tried to get some sleep. Finally, the bus had let him off outside the school doors, and he'd staggered gratefully out. At last, almost back at his dungeon sanctuary, where there was peace, solitude and a bottle of very strong brandy waiting for him. He checked the clock in the entrance hall. One in the morning. No one around, for which he was infinitely grateful. The thought of having to explain where he'd been and what had happened to him did not appeal in the slightest. After all, how did you tell someone that you'd been forcibly restrained, rendered absolutely powerless, had intense pain inflicted on you and been coerced into sexual intercourse against your will by Caitlin Tyler? Especially when scenes of just that nature formed a large part of the sexual fantasies of most of the adult wizard population of Great Britain? You didn't, of course. He could just imagine it now, the likes of Flitwick, Lockhart and Kettleburn all saying dreamily "Caitlin Tyler clad in tight-fitting, skimpy Lycra? Abusing you and hurting you? Then making you have sex with her? You lucky, lucky bastard!" before sighing with bliss and passing out. How ironic, right up until a few hours ago, he'd have been thinking much the same thing. If anyone else had come to him with a story like that, his main feeling would have been one of deep, deep envy. Actually, no, he thought, his main feeling would probably have been something along the lines of a furious, jealous rage that anyone else had dared to touch his Caitlin, but envy would definitely have been there somewhere.

Severus shook his head in disbelief. His Caitlin? What was he thinking? She'd never really been his, and after tonight, probably never would be. And yet he couldn't shake her image out of his mind. Quickening his pace as he made for the safety of his dungeon sanctuary, he tried to hold back the tears. Why the hell do I still have to love you, Cait? he thought. Why can't I just get over you? He shuddered. He'd never felt so tainted, never felt so repulsive as he did now. All he could think was how worthless he was, how Caitlin would never want him now. He laughed bitterly. Good gods, what was he thinking? Idiotic, he knew, but part of him desperately wanted to go back to her, was desperate for any kind of reaction from her. I'll serve you forever, Caitlin, you can do whatever you want to me, I'll let you use and abuse me, I'll suffer all the pain you can dream up for me, just let me be near you. Severus felt his heart breaking. Caitlin Tyler, what the hell have you done to me? he thought.

He entered his deserted classroom and made straight for his office and inner sanctum. Fumbling with his wand as he opened the door, he couldn't help laughing bitterly at himself.

"You were right, love," he whispered. "I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?"

"Professor?" a girl's voice came from behind him. Severus spun round. Luella was sitting there, perched on a desk in what he had wrongly assumed had been an empty classroom. She was dressed simply in Muggle clothes, with her school cloak for warmth, wand illuminating her and revealing an expression of fear and concern, changing to one of horror when she saw his face.

Slipping off the desk, she walked swiftly over to him. "My god, what on earth happened to you?" she whispered in shock. She reached out to touch his cheek, too stunned to say anything else.

"Nothing," he snapped, brushing her hand away. "Miss Martin, what the hell are you doing up, it is long past curfew."

"It was you, wasn't it?" whispered Luella, not appearing to have heard him. "It was you, in my dream. I could hear someone sobbing, crying for help, could feel their pain, and knew I had to heal them. Couldn't find them though, and then I woke up. I didn't know what to do, just had this feeling that something was wrong, that I was needed more than I'd ever been. Then I could almost hear this voice telling me to find you, that I was needed here tonight." Her eyes pierced his as she reached up to touch his injuries again. "Are you all right?" she asked in a hushed voice. He flinched as her fingers brushed across the bruises on his face, but this time he did not push her away, as the look in his eyes changed from one of anger to one of deep, fathomless need.

Severus felt his bravado collapse. He was suddenly very aware of a longing for company. From a student? a little voice whispered. She's no ordinary student, he thought. She's got a reputation as a good listener. And gods know she's already seen too much now. He felt his self-control snap as the loneliness of thirty eight years finally overwhelmed him.

"Ah, Luella," he sighed. "Not even you could redeem this Slytherin. But I don't want to be alone tonight. Come in." He opened the office door for her. Luella sheathed her wand, pulled her cloak round her and walked in.

Luella settled herself into a chair, her eyes not leaving her Potions master for a second. He said nothing to her, just reaching into a cupboard by the wall and producing a glass tumbler and a bottle labelled Old McCromerty's Finest Firewater, before pouring himself a drink and sinking into the chair opposite. He took a swig of it and leant back in his seat, smiling bitterly at Luella.

"Forgive me if I don't offer you a drink, but I really don't think you'd like this. It's not a beverage for the young, this. You need maturity, experience and a taste of life's bitterer lessons to really appreciate a good brandy. An excellent painkiller though, and

not just for the body either." He knocked back the rest and poured himself another. Falling into silence, he sat there, staring into space with those haunted black eyes of his. Luella had seen that expression in them before on occasion, but never for so long. Never so openly. Normally, he'd be hiding the emotion before she'd even registered properly that it was there. Not tonight.

Luella drew her cloak around her, the cold and dark oppressing her. "Professor," she said timidly, "is there any way we can have the fire on? It's not very warm in here."

For the first time that evening, Severus allowed himself a smile. "Of course you can, child. *Ignito*." The fire roared into life, dispelling the gloom in an instant, bathing the entire room in a golden glow, warming Luella's skin like the sun after a week of rain. She noticed Severus responding to it as well, for he seemed to sit up and revel in the dancing firelight.

He saw her watching him. "What, can't take your eyes off me?" he said, a hint of laughter hovering around his features. "Now there's a first. I was never beautiful before and I doubt I'm any better looking now."

Luella bit back the first thought that came to her mind. That thought being that even with lurid purple bruises flowering on his face and dried blood forming an intricate web around the swollen cuts that marred his features, Severus Snape still looked extraordinarily attractive to her eyes. Cloaked in sadness and misery as he was, with eyes that looked like they'd seen the very depths of hell itself, clutching his brandy glass as if his life depended on its numbing, soothing qualities, he exuded an aura of vulnerability and defencelessness that drew Luella irresistibly to him. I want to heal you, I want to take your pain away, and yet... Luella couldn't help thinking that she didn't want this moment to end. She'd never seen him without his usual defences up before, apart from the occasional unguarded moment, and she certainly wasn't averse to seeing him so laid bare now. This is the real Severus Snape, she thought, the awareness hitting her like a physical blow. And my god, he's amazing.

But all she said was "You don't look too bad."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Compared to what? And looks can be very deceiving, Luella. Trust me, I'm not at all what I seem."

"What, so you're not a vicious, sarcastic sadist, then?" Luella grinned, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

Severus laughed, but there was no humour there. "Everyone thinks that, don't they? Severus Snape, the sarcastic bastard, vicious bastard, unfeeling bastard, every kind of bastard you could imagine, but never one capable of feeling hurt. Oh, don't worry about tormenting Severus, he's hard, he can take it. Never mind that maybe he has feelings too, that maybe the very reason he's so malevolent is to keep you too far away to hurt him." Severus finished his second glass of brandy, before pouring another and staring into the fire, as if scared to look anywhere else. "Luella, have you ever been in love?"

Luella briefly debated whether to be truthful or not, but then decided that discretion was the wisest choice, particularly given that the object of her affections was sitting in front of her. "No, sir."

"No, I suppose not. I keep forgetting how young you really are, you seem so much older sometimes. Well, here's some advice for you." he said, staring fixedly at the flames, pausing only to take a few more sips of brandy. "Steer clear of anyone with more troubles than you. Don't fall for that woundedness and hurt that some call vulnerability but which I prefer to think of as just plain traumatised. Don't think you'll be able to heal them. You won't. Let the wounded heal each other. Let them fight with and abuse each other, let them nightly commit crimes against humanity in the name of love. They deserve each other. You don't. Keep your innocence, Luella. I'd like to save you, if I can. Save you from ending up like me. Ending up like this." He shuddered, wincing as if to shut out some deep pain. Closing his eyes, he took another desperate gulp of brandy, aching for the release it could bring.

"Professor..." Luella whispered. Severus silenced her with a gesture.

"Don't waste your pity on me. I'm not worth it. I'm not worth your sympathy, not worth your kindness. You are far too innocent to be burdened with my problems, and the only reason I didn't snarl at you to get back to bed immediately before I gave you detention was because right now I'm too needy and weak-willed to want to do the right thing, and getting far too drunk to care. Because I'm a selfish bastard who wants some company, any company. I've been lonely for a long time, and I don't think I've ever been happy. That was never my lot in life as a child, and I've certainly not done anything in my adult life to merit something so rewarding. Quite the reverse." He turned to look at her, subjecting her to a scrutiny almost hungry in its intensity. "I envy you, Luella. I really do. You're young, you're carefree, your childhood has, from what I've heard, been one where you've been indulged and loved, and you have been happy. Keep it that way. Hold on to your innocence, Luella. Because once it's gone, it's gone forever."

Luella felt herself beginning to blush. "I can't stay single forever, sir."

"I didn't mean that." Severus said, brandishing his glass with an air of irritation. "You could be married for years, maybe several times over, or have a different lover every week, and still be innocent. I'm talking about a faith in the justice of life, a certain trust that everything will turn out right, that there's always a happy ending and that the world is a friendly place with your best interests at heart. A feeling that you will always be protected and provided for, somehow. You've got it. Few of your housemates have, although oddly enough, Miss Lovegood also has it in her own mischievous way. I've never had it. Caitlin used to have it, but hasn't done since Deanna was conceived. And I'm not certain Deanna's ever had it either, although sometimes she shows flashes of it. Count yourself lucky, Luella. May you never lose it. It's a precious thing, the most precious thing you will ever own. And that's why I'm warning you to steer clear of those who don't have it, because if you become involved with them, hoping to heal them somehow, all that will happen is that they'll drag you down with them until you're as scarred as they are. Until you're one of them. That's what happened to Caitlin Tyler, you know. She had the misfortune to fall in love with someone who didn't know the first thing about real love, only death and betrayal, and

now look at her. Cruelty is second nature to her. Yes, she's kind and charming, but she is also ruthless, cold and deadly. And yet she was like you once. She was like you once." Severus's voice trailed off. He was staring into the fire again, but the hurt had subsided, to be replaced with a look of deep sorrow, intermingled with a firm seasoning of regret. Shivering, he took another long swig of brandy, emptying the glass.

Luella felt her heart go out to him. Poor man, he looks so sad, Luella thought. What did happen to you? And then a sudden realisation occurred to her. Caitlin Tyler, once a carefree young innocent, but who fell in love with the wrong person and got turned into a psychopathic killer as a result. It slowly began to dawn on her who that wrong person must have been. And with that piece of information in place, her suspicions about his past crystallised into cold, hard certainty.

"It's you," she whispered. "She was in love with you, wasn't she?"

Severus didn't reply. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to meet hers. And the emotions she read there killed off any remaining doubts.

"Yes she was, the poor, deluded fool. And like every other woman who's ever made the mistake of loving me, she suffered horribly as a result. More fool her for thinking I was worth her affections. And more fool me for not realising I returned them until it was far too late." He hung his head in shame, silently pouring himself another brandy.

"You're Deanna's father, aren't you?" Luella said tonelessly. Severus nodded once.

"She must never know," he said, sadness suddenly giving way to urgent desperation. "Luella, promise me now that you will not tell her. The truth would destroy her. She must not, cannot, ever know that I am her father."

"She won't hear it from me," Luella said, her mind racing back to that conversation with Deanna outside Gringotts. "No, I won't tell her." Other implications, hot on the heels of that admission, were now forcing themselves on her. "You were a Death Eater, weren't you?"

"Not something I'm proud of, believe me. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it was the worst mistake of my life. I did eventually realise the error of my ways and change sides, but by then it was too late. Too late for Caitlin, anyway." Severus fell silent, letting Luella fill in the gaps for herself.

"Dear god," she whispered, her mind reeling. "I knew you'd had a rough time, but I didn't know... Why are you telling me all this!" she snarled, eyes blazing. "Why the hell do you think I need to know this! Couldn't you have just left me wondering? Couldn't you have let me nurse my suspicions in private? Why on earth did you have to drag me in here, sit me down and proceed to tell me more than I ever wanted to know about my best friend's mother and what a rotten time she's had! Why did you have to tell me more than I ever wished to know about you?" Her voice died to a whisper.

Severus looked away guiltily. "I'm sorry, Luella." he began, fumbling for the right words. "I just had to talk to someone and... Forgive me, this was wrong from the start. I should never have let it get this far. You'd better go."

Luella was not won over. "You had just better hope and pray to every god you believe in and all the ones that you don't, that Deanna never finds out." she said scathingly, her voice trembling, but the anger still very much there. "Because if she ever does, there will be hell to pay. Do you have any idea what she thinks of you?"

"No, what does she think of me?" Severus asked, curious.

"She thinks the world of you. She thinks you are the most perfect man on the planet. You are her role model, her mentor, the light of her life and she absolutely adores you. In her eyes, you can do no wrong. Do you know, she actually said to me that she wished you'd married her mother when she was young? Reckons she'd loved to have had you around growing up. Says she could spend hours in your company, just talking with you. I very much doubt you'll get her to admit it, but she loves you. She really does."

"She does?" Severus's eyes lit up, and the pain seemed to vanish. "Really? I mean, she really said all that about... about me?" The bitterness lifted, and for the first time, Luella saw her Potions master smile, really smile. A genuine, rarely seen smile that transfigured him into some kind of angel, a beaten, fallen angel, but an angel nonetheless.

"Don't get too happy." Luella said. "She would be devastated if she knew the truth." However, her anger abated as she felt her heart melting at the sight of that smile. "Well, she won't hear it from me. I don't want to see her hurt." She gazed at him, the memory of that smile completely displacing any lingering rage. I wish he could be that happy all the time, she thought. Poor thing, all he wants is to be loved. He must be so lonely. Luella watched him sitting there, brutalised but still so very attractive. She found herself overcome by this insane desire to hold him, to whisper words of comfort into his ear, to banish his inner demons and heal him, give him the love he was so obviously crying out for.

She shook her head. Insane, absolutely insane. No chance of him ever returning her feelings. And yet she couldn't leave him like this. An idea began to take shape, fuelled by the memory of another occasion in this same room only last year, a cut on her face, blood on her hands, Professor Snape healing her with a word. I might not be able to give you the love you need, but I can sure as hell heal you, she thought.

Getting up and drawing her wand, she walked over to him and perched herself on the arm of his chair. Severus drew back in surprise.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, girl?" he snapped at her.

"Healing you." Luella said simply. "Now shut up and let me get on with it."

Severus could only watch in amazement as Luella touched her wand to each wound in turn, healing them with a word. She worked slowly but methodically, turning his head

this way and that with a tenderness Severus hadn't been shown for a very long time. He found himself unable to take his eyes off her, those cool silvery eyes seeming to penetrate to the very core of his being. All he could think was, she knows. She knows and yet she's healing me. Is there nothing she can't see? And is there no one she can't show kindness to? He found himself wondering how on earth she ended up in Slytherin, before dismissing that thought in an instant. Just because she's compassionate doesn't mean she's weak, he reminded himself. Rather, ask what Slytherin did to deserve her. Hope began to blossom in the unpromising ground of Severus Snape's heart. Could it be that he wasn't so unworthy after all? The thought thrilled him even as his rational mind told him not to be so foolish.

At length, Luella finished and put her wand away. "There." she said with satisfaction. "Your looks are restored."

"Shame. I don't suppose you could have taken the opportunity to improve them while you were at it?" Severus asked lazily.

Luella giggled nervously. "I'm not that good."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure how to take that. In light of the fact that I happen to think quite highly of you, I shall choose to think of it as modesty on your part as opposed to sarcasm."

"Thank you, sir." Luella murmured, blushing. For a moment, they said nothing to each other, just looked into each others' eyes. Again, Severus felt a sudden surge of joy. She knows, she knows, and she doesn't find me completely repulsive! He felt the urge to sweep her into his arms and hold on for dear life, weeping tears of joy on her shoulder, professing the gratitude he felt using every single word he'd ever heard. However, he reined himself in.

"I believe I should be thanking you." he said quietly.

"Why?" Luella asked in surprise.

"Healing me. Putting up with the inane drunken ramblings of an embittered old man. Not running in disgust. Thank you."

Luella blushed, looking away in shyness. "Well, it was nothing really. I mean, you just looked so, well, sad. I couldn't stay angry at you for long."

"Well, I'm very grateful." Reaching out as if in a trance, he began idly tracing his fingertips along the line of her jaw. "Slytherin Redeemer, you have truly earned that title now. You healed more than my body tonight."

"Professor." Luella began. Severus immediately snapped back to full consciousness and realised what he was doing. He jerked his hand back immediately.

"Forgive me." he said, suddenly as embarrassed as she'd been. "I don't know what possessed me. You had better go, Luella. I've detained you for long enough."

Luella slipped reluctantly off the chair. It seemed that their moment of intimacy was at an end. She knew better than to think that it would ever be mentioned again, let alone repeated. In the morning, they'd return to being teacher and student, and life would carry on as it had done before. Luella almost laughed. As it had done before? Two new secrets to nurture - that Professor Snape had once been a Death Eater who'd raped Caitlin Tyler and fathered her child, and another, with an even more deadly potential. She was in love with him. No sense denying it now. How could she? Seeing him so defenceless, so vulnerable, so... open. It had taken all her self-control not fling her arms round him and kiss him there and then. And now it was all over and he was sending her away. In the morning, the boundaries would be firmly re-established, and she doubted they'd ever get that close again. I don't want this to end, I don't want to leave you, I love you, please... The words trailed off, unspoken.

He wasn't watching her now, just staring fiercely into the flames.

"Professor," she began. "Are you, I mean, will we..." She fought to find words that would leave the connection open without revealing her true feelings. "Are you sure you'll be OK? I mean, what happened to you tonight? You never did tell me."

She saw him freeze momentarily, pain flashing across his face again. "I don't want to talk about it," he said, with a firmness that forestalled any further questioning. "However, let's just say that the debt of fifteen years ago has been repaid in full."

The debt of fifteen years ago had been repaid in full. The phrase continued to haunt her the following day as she tried to puzzle out what he could have meant. The debt of fifteen years ago. Owed to who? And how had they exacted repayment? She didn't really want to think about it, especially if it had involved the injuries she'd healed. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty awful. The look in his eyes had said more than words ever could, as if he'd been deeply wounded, deeply betrayed. She recalled the words she'd heard him saying, unaware of her presence. "You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?", followed by a mirthless laugh. She couldn't imagine what they meant though, or who had said them to him originally. The only person she could ever imagine him calling love, though, was Deanna's mother, which opened up a whole host of possibilities that she really didn't want to think about. She was certainly capable of inflicting wounds like that on him, and he certainly owed her a pretty big debt. A debt that was fifteen years in the making... Dear god, what had Caitlin Tyler done to him?

"What's up, Lu?" Deanna asked cheerily. "You look like you're in a little world of your own there."

Luella shook herself. "It's nothing. I'm just thinking."

"You're always thinking. Start interacting with the rest of the world for a change!"

"Nothing wrong with thinking," Rianne said. "Our Lu's got a deep mind. You leave her alone."

"Well, you've been away with the fairies a lot more than usual today. What's on your mind, Lu?" Deanna asked curiously.

"Nothing. Just things. Look, I'm going to the dorm. Catch you lot later." Luella got up and headed out. The last thing she wanted to do was confide in Deanna. Now that Deanna had decided she actually liked Snape, Luella really didn't want to worry her. Especially if her mother was involved somehow.

Deanna watched her go and turned to Rianne. "Someone talk to me, please. I'm bored! What are you up to, Ri?"

Rianne was playing with Marlie's Game Boy, staring intently at the screen with a look of deep concentration on her face, her thumbs skilfully manipulating the controls.

"Don't distract me, I'm at a crucial stage."

"Tetris, I suppose." said Deanna, peering over her friend's shoulder. "Ri, I thought you said you couldn't see the point of it? Didn't you say that it was a frivolous waste of time? One of Marlie's pointless Muggle toys, you said."

"That's right." said Rianne, expertly flicking a block into a perfectly formed gap. "But this particular game requires a lot of skill. It demands an eye for detail and good reflexes, all of which are useful attributes to have. It's very tricky. Now stop distracting me, I'm on Level Six and looking to beat my high score."

Deanna watched the game over her shoulder. "It's awfully fast, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tyler, that is the bloody point." said Rianne, becoming increasingly more irritable. "How are you meant to increase the difficulty level otherwise?"

"Hey, there's another one of them l-shaped blocks on its way down. Spin it round a few times, it'll go nicely in that space on the left - ah." Rianne, distracted, had accidentally sent the block in the wrong direction entirely, and the screen was reading "Game Over". Deanna hastily backed away as Rianne turned slowly to look at her, the fury in her eyes saying more than words ever could.

"Tyler. Go away." she said, each word complete with its very own ice cap.

"Sorry, Ri." Deanna muttered, swiftly leaving Rianne cursing as she entered her name in to the high score table and started another game. Deciding to seek entertainment from a safer source, she turned to Marlie, who was staring moodily across the room at the Slytherin Quidditch team. Her erstwhile teammates were busy showing off new brooms and chatting about a new Seeker. Not that Marlie had really been paying much attention. She was too busy watching them all and picturing what could have been, what once had been. She started as Deanna nudged her elbow.

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"Good lord, not another one!" Deanna sighed, throwing up her hands in frustration. "Marlie, snap out of it, girlie. What's up with you anyway?"

"If you have to ask, Tyler..." Marlie sighed.

"She's depressed about not being on the team this year." Rianne said lazily, her eyes not leaving the console. "That's why she's been staring at them for the past half hour. At least, I hope it is. The alternative is that she's got a crush on Marcus Flint and that's just too awful to contemplate."

"That's rich, coming from you." snapped Marlie.

"Old joke, Lovegood." Rianne said calmly. "Marls, just accept that you're not on the team, get over it and start planning your comeback. It's the Slytherin thing to do."

"Easy for you to say!" Marlie said. "I'm upset! Let me be depressed in peace, you two."

Rianne turned to Deanna. "Feelings, eh? Always screwing up your life when you most need to be rational. They're a dead loss, I'm telling you. Keep them under control, or they'll screw your life up something chronic."

"Easy for you to say." Deanna said quietly. "Mine are a pain in the arse to deal with." She glanced over at the team and noticed something that made her sit up. "Marls, has your brother got a new broom? Because that's no Cleansweep."

Marlie looked at her brother's broom closely for the first time, her face going pale. "That's a Nimbus Two Thousand and One!" she gasped. "They're really expensive, how on earth...? Mum and Dad never bought him one of those!" Getting up, she marched straight over to him. Mike Lovegood, in the middle of caressing his new broom, glanced up and immediately started to look rather nervous.

"Er, hi sis." he said, starting to blush. Marlie stood before him, hands on hips, a tower of fury.

"What, Mike Lovegood, is *that*?"

"It's a broom." he said, smiling just a bit too innocently.

"A broom." Marlie said quietly. "Whose? Yours?"

"Er..." Mike looked desperately at Kat and Summer, both of whom were giving him looks that said all too clearly "She's your sister, you deal with it."

"It might be." Mike said evasively.

"It might be." Marlie said quietly. "Michael, surely you know if you own a Nimbus Two Thousand and One or not? They're the best on the market, the very best, and they've only been out a month or so. If I had one, I think I'd know about it, don't you?"

"Mike, stop being such a coward, she's your little sister, not your mum." Kat said wearily. "Yes, Marlie, it's his."

"I see." Marlie said quietly. "So tell me brother. Where did you get the money to buy one of them? Because I don't recall Mum and Dad getting one for you!" Marlie's voice rose to a scream. Mike cowered behind his broom. "So what the hell are you doing with a top range broom like that??"

"Marlie, please, don't be cross." Mike said, trying to appease his furious sister. Marlie ignored him, looking at the rest of the team, suddenly realising that they too all had shiny new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones.

"You've all got them!" she shouted. "What the hell did you do, ramraid a broom shop or something?"

Mike said something that sounded like "meep".

"Er, we got given them." Kat said, giving her most charming, yet somehow strangely guilty, smile.

"A donation for the team, like." Summer added helpfully.

"Who from?" Marlie fumed. "Nimbus sponsoring you or something?"

"Not exactly." Flint said languidly. Marlie fell quiet, a horrible feeling of foreboding sneaking up her spine.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Flint just grinned nastily.

"Our new Seeker got them for us, as a thank you for picking him." he said, grinning horribly. "A little goodwill present."

"Your new Seeker bought you all new brooms?" Marlie whispered. "But that must have cost a fortune, who on earth's rich enough to do that?" Her voice trailed off as the realisation hit her. There was only one person in Slytherin with parents rich enough to buy seven new Nimbuses, and the inclination to do it. Slowly, she turned around, her eyes picking out her cousin, Draco Malfoy. One look at him confirmed it. He was grinning even more than Flint.

"Hey, cous." he said gleefully. "I'm on the team. Going to congratulate me?"

Marlie shook her head in disbelief. "They did not choose you." she said, stunned.

"They did. As of yesterday, I'm official Slytherin Seeker." Draco grinned. "But I'll let you run my fan club if you like. You'd make a good cheerleader, you know."

"Shut up." Marlie hissed in fury. Shaking her hair out, she drew herself up to her full height and gave him her most imperious look. "Well, congratulations, cousin." she said coldly. "I hope you make a good Seeker. But I see it took you a year to do it. And I never needed bribery either." With that, she turned and walked out, head held high, eyes blazing. It was only in the privacy of the corridor leading to her dorm that she folded her arms around herself and hastily blinked back the tears.

It was in that frame of mind that Marlie stormed back into the dorm and flung herself down on her bed. Snowy immediately leapt into his mistress's lap, mewing in an attempt to console her.

On the opposite bed, Luella glanced up. "Something the matter, Marlie?"

"They've got a new Seeker." Marlie said sulkily, cuddling her cat for all she was worth.

"Who?" Luella asked.

Marlie buried her face in Snowy's luxuriant fur. "Malfoy." she said, choking. "They picked Malfoy." She began sobbing. "They preferred Malfoy to me. All because his father bought the entire team some nice, shiny new brooms! Bastards!" she wept. "Bastards, bastards, bastards. I mean, I can believe Flint would do it. But what about the rest of the team? I thought they liked me! I can't believe they could just stand back and let that git buy his way on to the team. I mean, my own brother!" She put Snowy down and brushed away the tears, turning to look at Luella. "Do I mean that little to them?" she whispered. "After three years as a team, they chuck me over for him. Well, I hope they're happy with themselves! I hope they never win a game without me."

"You don't mean that." Luella said quietly.

"I bloody do, Lu." Marlie said fiercely. "If there's any justice in the world at all, they won't see that Quidditch Cup with green and silver ribbons on it again until I'm back on the team in some way. You'll see! The day will come when they'll come crawling back to me begging me to join the team again."

"Don't tell me." Luella sighed. "You'll then take great pleasure in telling them where they can stick their Quidditch and watch them squirm."

"Hardly." Marlie said, grinning. "I mean, I'd leave them hanging on for a bit, obviously. But I'd graciously and magnanimously accept in the end, as a favour to them because I'm nice like that."

"And you wouldn't lord it over them at all, would you?" Luella said, beginning to grin herself.

"Me?" Marlie said in wide-eyed innocence. "My dear Luella, I can't even begin to imagine where you'd get the idea that *I* would ever do a thing like that."

Luella laughed. "Marls, you'd throw your weight around at every single opportunity, you big prima donna, you." She smiled gently at her giggling friend. "So you've cheered up then."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." Marlie said reflectively. "But I'll get over it. And I **WILL** get back on that team somehow. I don't know how yet, but I will. And I tell you this. Slytherin reserves aren't going to lose a game all season. Not with me leading them."

Marlie said, eyes burning bright. She turned to look at Luella again, her face softening. "So. Luie. What's up with you? And don't tell me nothing's wrong. You've spent all day staring moodily into space with this weird look on your face. What's on your mind, mate?"

Luella sighed. Should she tell her? She wasn't sure whether Marlie would make a good confidant or not. And yet, she did need to talk to someone and there wasn't really anyone else.

"All right. It's Professor Snape." she said wearily.

"What?" Marlie shrieked. "Lu, you don't fancy him, do you? Dear gods, not you as well. It's bad enough with Rianne. Even Deanna seems to have fallen under his spell. What is it with him?"

"Two words, Marlie. Gilderoy and Lockhart." Luella said warningly. Marlie shut up immediately. Luella grinned and continued. "No, it's not that. I'm worried about him, Marls."

"Worried?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "Why? I mean, he's a teacher. It's not our job to worry about teachers. Come on, Lu, he's thirty eight. Old enough to look after himself by now."

"Yeah?" Luella laughed hollowly. "Didn't seem that way last night."

"Last night?" Marlie was intrigued now. Settling into a comfortable gossiping position, she leaned forward, all ears. "What happened last night? Is it saucy?"

"Marlie, this is in the strictest confidence. I don't want this going round school, understand? Not a word to anyone else here, OK?"

"Promise."

"Good." said Luella firmly. "Because if I hear any rumours about this, I will use Glamoury to make you think the Slytherin Serpent is following you everywhere trying to suck out your brains. Got it?"

"OK, OK." Marlie said, shivering. "Not a word. You got me. Damn, you're evil sometimes."

"I like to think so." Luella replied coolly. Getting up, she walked over to Marlie's bed, curling up with one of her friend's purple heart-shaped cushions held close against her, and gazing distantly into space as she recalled the events of the previous night.

"I had a nightmare."

Marlie froze. Luella hardly ever had bad dreams, but the last time she had, it had not been good news.

"Lu. Oh Lu. It's not..." Marlie hesitated. Although unlike most mages, she was quite capable of saying the name, it didn't mean she didn't fear it. "It's not him, is it? You know, Voldemort."

Luella shook her head. "No. This was different. Someone I knew was being hurt, was in trouble. I was trying to find them but I couldn't. Woke up and knew it was no dream. Someone really was in trouble. I checked on you lot first, but you were fine."

"Nice of you." said Marlie. She paused. "How do I look when I'm sleeping?" she asked, curious. "Do I look incredibly glamorous and sexy?"

"Marlie, you look like some beautiful nymph straight off Mount Olympus itself. A picture of youth and beauty, marred only by your snoring."

"What?" shrieked Marlie. "Snoring?? I do not snore!" Another pause. "I don't, do I?"

"Not very loudly." said Luella. This did not comfort Marlie in the slightest.

"Snoring! Oh gods..." she moaned. She sat up, putting self-pity behind her. "Right. That does it. I shall have to ask Rianne to do me an Anti-Snoring Potion of some kind. I am not going to be known as the Girl Who Snored for the rest of my life. I am the Slytherin Sex Kitten, I can't possibly snore!"

"Marlie, grow up." said Luella, getting a little annoyed. "Anyway, do you or do you not want to hear about what happened last night?"

Marlie immediately returned her attention back to her friend. "Of course. So, you had a bad dream, were still scared that someone was in trouble, but checked on us and we were fine. Then what?"

"Sat down and thought. I could still sense that someone out there needed me. Then it hit me. I needed to find Professor Snape. So I went to his office. I was going to ask for a Sleeping Potion, tell him I'd been having nightmares again. At worst, I'd have got a decent night's sleep out of it. He wasn't in though."

"Not in?" said Marlie, raising an eyebrow. She began to grin slyly. "Not in his bedroom in the early hours of the morning, eh? So what was he up to? Out drinking? Don't tell me he's got a lady friend!" Marlie was barely able to contain herself, her mood having picked up considerably. "Snapey's got a girlfriend! Oh, wait until I tell Tyler..."

"Marlie! I'm warning you, Slytherin Serpent trying to suck your brains out. Don't make me do it." warned Luella threateningly. "No, I'm sure he doesn't. I'm sure he wasn't out on a romantic date anyway. I was about to give up and go back to bed when he turned up. He looked like he'd been in a fight, Marlie. You should have seen him, blood everywhere, bruised, all hunched up and quiet, like he just didn't want to face anyone. He didn't see me at first, just went straight to his office and opened the door, saying..." She paused, remembering the phrase as if she'd heard it only moments ago. "He said 'You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?'" Luella shivered. "I dropped the glamour and spoke to him. He tried to get rid of me at first,

but I refused to go. More fool me." She laughed bitterly. "Should have gone to bed while I had the chance. Anyway, something in him just seemed to give, as if he couldn't bear to be alone any more. He showed me into his office, and we talked."

Marlie's eyes widened. "You were in his office? In the early hours of the morning? On your own? Oh my... Lu, what's going on? What have you got yourself mixed up in? You're not... you know... are you?"

"No!" Luella snapped. "He's a teacher, as if I would. Listen, it was him I was dreaming about. Something happened to him, Marlie. Something really bad. He didn't just get himself beaten up, something more happened. And I think..." she hesitated. "I think it was done by someone he cared about."

"Someone he cares about?" Marlie asked. "Blimey, Lu, I didn't know there was such a person."

"Well there is." Luella said softly. "He's got feelings too, and they were hurt big time. He refused to tell me what had happened to him, just kept giving me all this advice about holding on to my innocence while I could, not getting involved with anyone with more problems than me, and generally not screwing my life up. He said he didn't want me to end up like him. He looked so afraid, so miserable, so frightened. I just couldn't take it. In the end, I got up and healed the wounds on him, which is why no one's noticed anything. He seemed really grateful, like he couldn't believe anyone could be that kind to him. He still wouldn't tell me what happened, he said I didn't deserve to be burdened with his problems. But he did thank me. Said I'd truly earned my Slytherin Redeemer title now."

Marlie was staring at her in amazement. "He said all that to you? Blimey. Lu, are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"No." she whispered. "No, I'm not sure at all! I am so scared for him, Marlie. And scared for me too! He's meant to be protecting me, training me up to be the Redeemer. Seeing him like that, though... He was nothing like he normally is in class. It was like all his usual defences were down, that whatever had happened to him was so bad that he just couldn't hide it. You didn't see the look in his eyes. He looked so hurt, so betrayed. Like a zombie." Luella hunched herself up tightly. "I'm frightened, Marls. So very, very frightened. I used to think he was so strong, could protect me from anything. That if Lord Voldie came calling, he would protect me, or failing that, whatever he'd taught me would. He was my mentor, my real Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Now, I just don't know. How is he supposed to protect me if he can't protect himself?" Luella said, her voice trembling.

Marlie let Snowy jump off her and reached out to cuddle her friend. "Lu, don't. You don't know what happened. It's not your problem. He was right, you know, it's not your responsibility. Try not to let it get to you, mate. He's tough. He'll survive. Didn't you say once that he'd been there, seen it, done it in the last war? Well then, he must have suffered worse. He'll recover."

"I hope so." Luella sighed. "I really do." She huddled up in a ball, drawing closer to Marlie for comfort. "Because I need him, Marls. I do. I can't fight Voldie without him."

Him and Caitlin, they're my mentors. They're like a second set of parents to me. I'm not going to make it without them, I need them both so badly, I hate it when they're at each other's throats." Her voice trailed off.

Marlie stared in shock. Even she could piece it together from these clues. "Lu, you're not saying... I mean, you don't think... Surely not? Deanna's mum? Did that to him? But why?"

"I don't know." said Luella. "But she's more than capable of lashing out if he said something untoward. I don't know, I just have this horrible feeling... Listen, Marls, you won't tell anyone, will you? I mean, I don't want the entire school knowing, and I definitely don't want Deanna finding out. Promise me!"

"OK, I promise. No one here at school's going to know." said Marlie, her mind running wild.

"Thanks, Marls. I appreciate it." said Luella, smiling. Marlie hugged her friend. However, her smile faded as she stared into space, looking over Luella's shoulder.

That night found Marlie sitting in the corner of the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed, quill in hand, writing a letter home to her mother. Of course she had promised Luella not to spread it around school. But she could hardly let this drop, could she? Not when Lu was so upset. I'm not interfering, she told herself. I'm not! Just that my mum knows them both, and if they've got some kind of grudge against each other, she's best placed to sort it out.

Marlie sealed her letter in its envelope, addressed it, and fixed it on to the claw Nesta was obligingly holding out for her. The falcon seemed to sense that this was no ordinary letter home, and co-operated perfectly. A good thing too, as Marlie hadn't actually asked Deanna if she could borrow the bird. She just hoped Deanna wouldn't need her in the next few days.

Nesta took off and disappeared up one of the air-vents that connected the Slytherin common room with the outside world. Marlie watched her go, a look of satisfaction on her face. Turning away, she realised that she wasn't alone after all. Ginny was curled up on an inflatable chair in another corner, scribbling something in a small leather book.

"Hey, Gin." Marlie called out cheerfully, getting up and wandering over to her young protegee. "How's tricks? You settling in OK?"

"Not bad." said Ginny, smiling weakly. "I mean, everyone here's being nice enough, really friendly. Even Malfoy's not as bad as everyone says he is. Lydia and Autumn are cool too. And the work's pretty straightforward really. Even Professor Snape's not too awful."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it." said Marlie, relieved. "What's that you got there, Gin?" She indicated the book in Ginny's lap.

Ginny immediately became defensive. "Nothing." she said hastily.

"Nothing?" said Marlie. "Come on, Gin, you can tell me. What is it?" She reached for the book. Ginny snatched it out of reach.

"No!" she cried. Marlie jumped back in surprise.

"All right, all right, I was just asking." she said. "Anyway, I'm going to bed. See you in the morning, Gin." And with that, Marlie left. She had far too much on her mind to worry about Ginny's personal belongings.

By contrast, Ginny was never far from Ron's mind, even though he was refusing to acknowledge her existence. It was now the third day of term, and Hermione and Harry were still waiting for Ron to get over the shock. The two of them were waiting outside Snape's classroom for their first Potions lesson of the year to start. Some of the other Gryffindors were there, but of Ron there was no sign.

Hermione wasted no time in getting to the point.

"How's Ron?" she asked Harry.

"Not good. Still bitter. Only been a few days though, Mione. Give him time."

Hermione tutted in irritation. "He is being such a prat about this, Harry. I mean, OK, so she's a Slytherin. What is his problem? Anyone would think she'd turned into a You-Know-Who supporter from the way he's been acting."

"Give him a break, Herm. She's his only sister and closest to him in age. They were very close. And you know what he's like about Slytherins."

"What's so bad about Slytherins?" Hermione asked. "I mean, I know Malfoy's a bit of a git, and Snape's not exactly charming, but even so, most of them are all right. Marlie's fun to hang around with, Rianne's not so bad when you get to know her, Deanna's cool as long as you don't annoy her, and Lu's the sweetest person I know. They're Slytherins too! Why Ron has to overreact all the time is beyond me. Honestly, he is so prejudiced." Hermione folded her arms, her face set in what Harry and Ron referred to as her McGonagall look.

Harry nudged her as Ron walked in. "Get smiling, he's here."

Both of them fell silent as he approached, looking more miserable than he'd done yet.

"Hi, Ron." said Hermione, smiling brightly.

"How are you feeling?" asked Harry, concerned.

"I've felt better." said Ron faintly. He stood next to them, dejected. "Heard from Mum and Dad today. Percy told them."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and sighed.

"What did they say?" asked Hermione gently.

"Not much." said Ron, a lump in his throat. "They were polite about it, nice enough. Said that if that was where she'd be happiest then it was all for the best, to remember that she was still our sister and not to treat her any differently." He shook his head, swallowing hard. "How can they take it so well?" he demanded, punching his hand. "How can they just sit there and accept it, their only daughter being in Slytherin? How can they tell us not to treat her any differently, to see her as a sister when she's..." He swallowed before continuing. "When she's one of *them*?"

Hermione gently hugged Ron, exchanging concerned looks with Harry.

"But they do have a point, Ron." she said softly. "I mean, if it's where she'll be happiest, it's for the best, right? She's still your sister, you know. And not all Slytherins are bad. Lu's a lovely girl and she's a Slytherin."

"She's not my sister." said Ron firmly. "It's different. That lot are different. They're proper Slytherins, they've always been Slytherins. Ginny's a Gryffindor." His voice lowered. "I thought she was a Gryffindor."

"She's still Ginny, though." said Harry. "She's not a different person just because she's a Slyth."

Ron raised his eyes to meet his. Harry flinched away. "Exactly." Ron said quietly. "My point exactly, Harry."

"Weasley!" came a gloating voice, all false friendliness and too-smooth charm. Draco.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" said Harry, gritting his teeth.

"Want? Well, I wanted a word with Weasley here. I noticed that he's not seen much of his charming little sister recently and I thought I'd update him on how she was settling in." Draco flashed his teeth at them.

"You stay the hell away from my sister, Malfoy." snarled Ron.

Behind Draco, Crabbe and Goyle snickered. Draco himself just smiled even more. "Why on earth would I want to do that? She's such a friendly, outgoing personality, we all adore her. The life and soul of the Slytherin common room. She'll be giving Marlie Lovegood a run for her money in a few years time, you just wait."

"My sister is nothing like Marlie Lovegood!" yelled Ron, going crimson. "My sister's not a tart like her!"

"No, I suppose you're right." mused Draco. "She's not my cousin either." The grin returned, driven by pure malice. "You know, she is quite attractive. I could quite fancy her myself when she's a bit older. Yes, I can quite see her as Ginny Malfoy. What do you think, Weasley? Fancy having me as a brother-in-law?"

Ron's control snapped. Before Hermione or Harry could stop him, he threw himself at Malfoy, slamming the Slytherin up against the wall.

"If you so much as look at my sister, Malfoy, I swear I will punch your friggin' lights out!" he hissed at him.

"I'd like to see you try!" Draco laughed harshly. Crabbe and Goyle drew their wands and advanced. Then fell back instantly. Ron felt Hermione and Harry grabbing at his sleeves.

"Ron, Snape!" Harry hissed. Ron immediately let Draco go and stepped back. Too late.

Snape advanced on them, his eyes blazing. "And what exactly is going on here?" he said, in a soft voice that fooled none of them.

"Nothing." said Ron automatically.

"Weasley was attacking me, sir." said Draco in his usual fawning voice. "I just asked after his sister and he went for me."

Harry curled his fingers around his wand, fully expecting Snape to turn on Ron, and dish out detention, seasoned with a generous helping of sarcasm. However, Snape did nothing of the sort. His usual snide cynicism seemed to waver, and Harry, for the first time ever, saw something approaching weariness in his teacher's eyes. In fact, although he couldn't have sworn to it, there was something not a million miles away from hurt. As if Snape just couldn't, didn't want to deal with this anymore.

When he did speak, it was in a flat, toneless voice that took emotionlessness and redefined it as an emotion in its own right.

"You both know that fighting is against the rules. Five points from each of you. Now get inside and behave." With that, he turned and walked in.

Ron blinked. "Harry," he said, "that was Snape, wasn't it? I wasn't hallucinating, was I?"

"No, that definitely looked like him." said Harry, as confused as Ron was. "What do you make of it, Mione?"

Hermione shook her head. "No idea. He sounded really hacked off though, as though he'd been having a really bad time and just couldn't be bothered to hide it anymore."

Draco was having as much difficulty believing it as the Gryffindors.

"Professor Snape... just took points... off me!" he said, still in a state of shock. He stared wildly at them. "What's happening?"

"Don't look at us, he's your House Head." said Hermione primly. "Maybe he's finally decided to act fairly and impartially for once."

"WHAT?" shrieked all the Slytherins.

"He can't!" screeched Pansy Parkinson. "How are we going to win the Cup if he starts playing fair!"

"My heart bleeds for you." said Harry. "You'll have to earn your points fair and square for once."

"What, you mean... without cheating?" Draco looked horrified. "How?"

"That, Malfoy, is your problem." said Harry, beginning to grin. "Come on, let's not keep the newly reformed and fair-minded Snape waiting." He went in, Hermione and Ron following.

Draco spun round to face his fellow Slytherins. "This is not good news. Any ideas, folks?"

Crabbe and Goyle said nothing, looking bemused. Blaise Zabini, one of Pansy Parkinson's little gang, was first to speak.

"I suppose" she said timidly, "we could try playing fair, like what Potter said." She took in the looks her fellow Slytherins were giving her. "Or perhaps not."

"Playing fair," said Pansy imperiously, "is not the Slytherin way."

"Let's face it, if we can't cheat, we're done for." sighed Millicent Bulstrode, Pansy's other girl-chum. "What do we do, Draco? He's always liked you. Maybe you can have a word with him."

"I don't think so." said Draco. "Not given that I'm the one who just got points taken off. He'll guess something's up. No, there's only two people who've got enough influence with Snapey to find out what the hell's going on, and the ability to do it discreetly." Draco's features contorted in pain as he realised what he was going to have to do. "We're going to have to ask Tyler and Martin."

Chapter Six Confrontations, Recriminations and Negotiations

Evening in the Serpents' Nest and the Slytherin Four were quietly going about their own business, Rianne by now thoroughly addicted to Marlie's customised Nintendo, Marlie busying herself with some obscure Transfiguration tome, Luella studying her Tarot cards, and Deanna listening to Nirvana on the Walkmage while getting on with her Charms homework, when Luella's attention was caught by a whispered conversation nearby. She recognised the voices as those of Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy.

"Why do I have to ask her?" Draco was demanding. "She hates me, they all do."

"Exactly." replied Pansy. "You're the one with the strongest emotional connection there. They're more likely to do it if only to take the opportunity to have you in their debt."

"Bloody hell, Pansy. They're going to humiliate me, you know what they're like."

"Should have thought of that before you decided to make yourself their outright enemy, shouldn't you? Anyway, shut up, they've noticed us."

Luella was watching them casually, intrigued.

"Let's see." she said. "We've got the Fool crossed by Death, in between the Hermit inverted and the Devil, which can only mean one thing. I'm about to get bothered. What do you two want?"

Rianne paused her game and looked up. Her immediate reaction was to give Deanna a nudge.

"Wake up, Tyler, we've got company."

Deanna immediately removed her headphones and laid down her book, reaching for her wand.

"No need to get all defensive, Tyler." sneered Draco.

"Draco! Be nice!" hissed Pansy. "We need to keep her sweet."

"I know, I know." said Draco, irritably. He turned back to Deanna, his scowl changing into a smile.

"Tyler." he said sweetly. "We were wondering if perhaps you could help us out."

"Help you out." said Deanna. She glanced at her friends, all of whom were looking confused. She turned back to Draco. "Malfoy, ever since you started at this school, you have never lost the opportunity to abuse, tease, pick fights with and generally

harass me and my friends. So why on earth do you think I should be the slightest bit interested in helping you out?"

"Deanna, give him a break." said Rianne. "Think how hard it must be, after all the mutual loathing, for him to have to come and ask you for help and assistance. It must really take a dent out of his pride. Show some understanding, girlie."

"What are you saying, Ri?" asked Deanna, puzzled. "Are you saying I should be sympathetic and magnanimous towards his request?"

"No, Tyler, I'm telling you to milk it. Go on, mate, make him work for it!" Rianne was grinning in anticipation.

"Yeah, go on DT, make him suffer!" called Marlie.

"Cut it out!" snapped Luella. "Deanna, hear him out. It could be important."

"Very well." sighed Deanna. "Malfoy, what is it?"

"It's Snape." said Draco, pulling up a chair. "We're concerned about him."

Marlie and Luella both tensed immediately, but the attention being on Deanna, no one noticed.

"Worried how?" asked Marlie, exchanging looks with Luella.

"He's started taking points off Slytherin." said Pansy.

Deanna and Rianne gave each other puzzled looks. "What for?" asked Deanna.

Draco shifted uncomfortably. Deanna and Rianne continued to give him penetrating looks. Pansy, sensing the impasse, decided to intervene.

"Tell them, Draco." she said firmly. "Or I will."

"I was having a chat with Weasley." Draco muttered. "And, erm, things got a bit heated."

"Heated." said Rianne evenly. "I see."

"I wasn't taunting him or anything!" said Draco desperately. "I was just asking after Ginny and he went for me!"

"Just politely enquiring after her health, were you?" asked Deanna, her every word dripping sarcasm. "And he just lost it and went for you, did he? Of course. Should have guessed."

"Completely unprovoked attack! He just went mad all of a sudden!" protested Draco.

"Of course he did, Malfoy." said Luella, not even bothering to fake sincerity.

"You know, Malfoy, I sometimes wonder if even you can tell when you're lying any more." mused Rianne. "It's been so long since you told the truth, I'm amazed you can even remember what it is."

"Of course we can tell when he's lying." said Marlie irritably. "His lips are moving. So let me guess. Snape walked in on the fight and took points off you both."

"That's it!" nodded Draco.

"Well." said Rianne. "Fancy that. A teacher taking points off a student breaking the rules. Who would have thought it, eh Tyler?"

"Yeah, but this is Snape!" said Draco. "He's not meant to take points off us, is he? He's meant to overlook our failings, give us lots of points for no valid reason, and dock loads of points off everyone else! He can't start treating us fairly! We'll never win the Cup again!"

"He's got a point." said Marlie. "We're going to have our work cut out for us if we can't cheat any more."

"Maybe we don't want to win by cheating." said Deanna, beginning to grin. "Maybe we want to win fair and square for a change."

"WHAT?" Draco nearly screamed. "Playing fair? You can't. We can't! Playing fair is not the Slytherin way, damn it! We need to cheat! Tyler, please."

"Of course, I could be persuaded otherwise." said Deanna idly.

"How. I'll do anything." said Draco in desperation.

"Anything?" said Deanna, grinning.

"Anything."

Deanna leaned back in her chair, contemplating the possibilities. "All right. Say you're sorry for killing my original owl."

"I'm sorry for killing your original owl." muttered Draco. "Is that it?"

"Not yet. Tell Lu you're sorry for all the times you've called her a Mudblood."

Deanna watched in satisfaction as Draco's eyes flared with fury, before he controlled his anger and gave in.

"I'm sorry I called you a Mudblood, Martin."

"You're welcome, Malfoy. Don't do it again."

"There!" smiled Deanna. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Is there anything else, Tyler?" said Draco through gritted teeth.

"Say 'Haverfordwest Horntails are the best Quidditch team ever and I only support Montrose Magpies because I'm a pathetic glory-hunting git.' "

"I will do no such thing..." Draco started to say before Pansy gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs.

"Just say it! We do need her help after all." she hissed.

Draco looked far from happy at this, but nevertheless muttered it hastily under his breath.

"Didn't hear you, Malfoy." said Deanna sweetly. "Louder, if you please."

"Go on." whispered Pansy. "Just get it over with."

Draco sighed and repeated the phrase in a voice loud enough for most of the common room to hear.

"Wonderful, Malfoy. Well done, we didn't know you had it in you." smiled Deanna. "Finally, there is the Slytherin Code of Honour, in particular, section four, paragraph three, which states that for all favours granted, a favour of equal value must be returned. You owe me. Remember that, Malfoy."

"All right." muttered Draco, heartily beginning to regret this. "Well, will you talk to him for us?"

"OK." Deanna nodded. She returned to her homework. "In the morning."

"In the morning?" said Draco frantically. "Can't you go tonight?"

Deanna turned to look at him, eyes glittering with cold. "I'm busy, Malfoy. I have work to do. Your request is not so urgent that it cannot wait until tomorrow, can it?"

"No, Tyler." said Draco.

"Good. In which case, I shall bid you good evening. Goodbye, Malfoy. Goodbye, Pansy." She returned to her work, the rest of the Slytherin Four following suit. Draco and Pansy walked away, Draco trying to ignore Crabbe and Goyle sniggering at him.

"Pansy, I've a good mind to make you owe me for getting me to do that." Draco snapped. "Bloody hellfire, how am I going to live this down?"

"You'll manage." said Pansy, unbothered. "She said yes, didn't she? What more do you want?"

"Having my pride back would be nice." said Draco sulkily. Meanwhile, many miles to the south, Melissa Lovegood, enjoying a night off for once, the DDAE in Caitlin's

capable hands, was relaxing with a glass of wine, feet up in front of Coronation Street, curled up with her husband Leonard.

The Owlery alarm going off did not disturb her in the slightest. "Get that, Sukey." she said lazily to the house-elf, who scurried off immediately.

"You don't think it'll be work, do you?" Leonard murmured into her ear. "If so, tell them you've died or moved, or something. I'm enjoying this far too much to let you go at the moment."

"It won't be, Caitlin's quite capable of dealing with any emergencies." smiled Melissa. "Probably one of the kids or something. Or junk mail."

Sukey returned with a letter in hand. "It is from Miss Marlie, Mrs. Lovegood."

"Told you." she sighed. "Probably for you, Len. Some obscure mechanical thing she needs. Honestly, such talent, and she wastes it on devising magically-powered lava lamps. I ask you."

"No, no, it's for you, Mrs. Lovegood." said Sukey, brandishing the letter at her.

"For me?" Melissa asked in surprise. Marlie's letters were usually addressed to both of them, unless she needed her father to get some spare parts for her. Melissa took the letter, exchanged a surprised look with her husband and opened it.

Curiosity swiftly turned to disbelief, as Melissa pushed Leonard away and sat up, reaching for her shoes.

"I have to go to Hogwarts. Now. Sorry, love." she said apologetically.

"Now?" he said in surprise. "Honestly, it's the first free evening you've had all week, and you're disappearing off up there? What's up? Marlie is all right, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's fine, they both are. This concerns Severus."

Leonard's concern changed swiftly to irritation. "Oh. Severus. Should have known. Who else do you drop everything and run to help at a minute's notice. Hang on, wait a second. Why is Marlie writing to you about Severus?"

"She's heard rumours." said Melissa. "Not very nice rumours. Concerning him and Caitlin. Apparently they had some kind of fight."

"What, Caitlin and Severus? Arguing? Surely not." Leonard's voice dripped sarcasm.

"More than arguing. Apparently it got physical."

"Physical? You mean he hit her? Good lord, Mel, is she all right?"

"Caitlin Tyler is an Auror and a very highly-trained one. Her natural response on being physically attacked is to fight back. This is our Unarmed Combat specialist

we're talking about here! Caitlin will be just fine. It's Sev I'm worried about." Melissa finished putting her shoes on and headed for the hallway to retrieve her cloak and broom. "I'd better go and see him, find out what happened and try and sort things out."

Leonard looked at her in amazement. "You are determined to set those two up if it kills you, aren't you?"

"Of course. Darling, they're perfect for each other. They need each other. I just need to convince them." Melissa pulled her cloak on and adjusted her clothes in the mirror, before brushing her hair into shape.

"Perfect for each other. Of course. That's why they're always screaming at each other and throwing stuff whenever they meet up. You know Mel, have you ever thought of taking up an easier and less demanding hobby? Sorting out the Northern Ireland peace process, for example. Or ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hell, if you can get Caitlin and Severus together, nothing's beyond your talents."

"Don't be silly darling, if I get involved in Muggle politics now, I'll have nothing to do when I'm retired." said Melissa absently. "Right, I shouldn't be too late back. See you soon. Bye, Lenny." She kissed her husband goodbye, before turning and walking swiftly out past the Apparition wards.

Leonard Lovegood gazed ruefully into his own glass. "I'll say this for you, Mel. You don't ever give up, do you? I'm so glad you've never decided to make me one of your projects." "

Come in." said Severus idly as someone knocked on his door. To tell the truth, he was rather hoping for a distraction. He just hoped it wasn't news of another fight in the Slytherin common room. Or someone else discovering their parents had been on the wrong side during the war. Now that was always fun to deal with, wasn't it?

He was pleasantly surprised to see Melissa Lovegood enter.

"Mel! Come in, sit down, let me take your cloak. Can I get you a drink?"

Melissa slid into a chair, after allowing Severus to remove her cloak and hang it carefully behind the door.

"No thanks." She scrutinised him carefully, causing Severus to squirm. Melissa had a way of making him feel as if she could read minds. "How have you been, Severus? Really." She was giving him a look he wasn't used to seeing, certainly not on Mel Lovegood. A look of surprising gentleness.

"You came all this way to enquire after my wellbeing? Mel, how touching. I had no idea you found me so irresistible. I mean, I know I can't help being Aphrodite's gift to witches but even so..."

"Severus." Mel's voice cut straight through the charm. "Stop trying to change the subject. You're obviously not going to give anything away of your own accord, so I'll get straight to the point. Did you see Caitlin on Wednesday evening?"

The charming smile faded. For the briefest of moments, Melissa thought she saw a fleeting glimmer of pain there, before the mask went up again.

"Why, does she need an alibi? In trouble for Auror brutality again, is she?"

"Maybe." said Melissa. "Were you with her?"

"Why do you need to know?" Severus asked, the defensiveness of years out in force.

"That's a yes then." replied Melissa coolly.

"Not necessarily."

"Then deny it."

"I don't have to explain my every move to you, surely!" Severus snapped at her, bristling.

Melissa did not take her eyes off him, continuing to fix him with that intense tell-me-everything look of hers. Severus squirmed guiltily, heartily wishing she'd go away before he said something he shouldn't, something incriminating.

It was a while before Melissa answered him. When she did, it was in a tone of voice that reminded him eerily of Caitlin.

"You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?"

Severus felt the blood drain out of his face. "What the hell are you talking about?" he hissed at her.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about." Melissa leaned forward, her face deadly serious. "What happened that night, Severus? What happened, that you get in at one in the morning, looking like you've been in a fight? That you feel the need to curl up and get drunk afterwards? That you had to pour your heart out to a fourteen year old girl, and manipulate her into healing you so no one would know you'd been in that state?"

"I did not manipulate her!" Severus practically screamed. He immediately buried his face in his hands, realising what he'd said.

Melissa sat back in her chair, nodding grimly. "It's true then. You met up with Caitlin and got yourself beaten up for your pains. I do hope you weren't using the old 'You're still in love with me' line again. You know what a temper she's got."

Severus didn't meet her eyes. "No." he said, with difficulty. "No, I didn't say that to her. She said it to me." He stopped talking and stared at the floor, covering his eyes with one hand. Melissa waited while he tried to recover himself. At length he looked up, but still did not look at her. "It's true, you know. I do love her. Always have. Gods, Mel, I love her so much." His voice cracked on the last word and he swiftly hid his eyes again.

Melissa got up and moved round to perch on the arm of his chair, in much the same manner that Luella had done the week before. Melissa, however, had known Severus for long enough not to share her inhibitions. Sliding her arms around him, she pulled him into an embrace, soothing him until he was ready to continue.

"She will not want me now." he said, despair in his every syllable. "She hates me. Despises me. I'm the lowest of the low, worthless in every way. I'm scum, worse than scum. She loathes me. Absolutely loathes me, Mel. I make her skin crawl. Gods, Mel, why did I think she could ever love me? After what I did to her? I am nothing, Mel, I'm subhuman, I'm such a bloody disgrace to wizardkind..."

"It's all right, Severus." Melissa said quietly, continuing to soothe him. "Don't blame yourself, you did what you had to in order to save her."

"Lily didn't see it that way." Severus whispered. "Nor did you. Do you remember when I came to you after Voldemort fell, asking if I could see Caitlin? You agreed to ask her, then came back and told me she didn't want me anywhere near me ever again."

"But nevertheless I did ask." said Melissa. "I did ask her."

"You shouldn't have done." Severus said, his voice changing to sharp and abrupt. "She was absolutely in the right. What I did... there was no excuse. And no possible forgiveness. What she suffered because of what I did to her... Well, at least the debt's settled now. Settled with interest. At least she can't say I don't know what she went through."

Melissa froze, going numb as a horrible sense of foreboding gripped her. "Severus," she said, trying to stay calm, "what happened? What did she do to you? Tell me!" Her voice betrayed the rapidly rising hysteria.

"I can't." she heard him say. "I just... I don't want to talk about it. Don't make me, please."

She held him, trembling, the conclusions her mind was presenting her with striking fear into her heart, fear for herself, fear for Severus, but most of all fear for Caitlin.

"She didn't torture you." she whispered.

"Worse." She could barely hear the response, it was muffled by what could have been a sob.

"Worse than torture... Severus, no." Melissa breathed. "But how..."

"Dishabilius and Bodybind." he said, his voice devoid of any emotion. "That's how. Got to hand it to her, she's ingenious." He laughed his rapidly-becoming-trademark bitter laugh.

Melissa comforted him, fighting back her own feelings of horror. "Ssh, Sev, it's all right. It'll be OK." She felt her heart protest in pain, but regret it as she would, there

was really no other option. "I'll help you press charges, I'll make sure there's a full inquiry. I'll support you every step of the way, Severus."

Severus immediately broke away from her. "What do you mean?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"I can't let her get away with it." said Melissa imperiously. "I mean, I've tolerated her excesses until now, because it's only ever been Dark Arts practitioners who've suffered, and much as I hate to admit it, it's got results. Just putting her in charge of a case gets them turning themselves in. But this time, she's gone too far. She may be my friend, but I can't let her get away with torturing and sexually assaulting an innocent man. I shall have to fire her. We'll have to prosecute."

Severus shot to his feet, causing Melissa to nearly fall off the chair in surprise.

"You will do no such thing!" he snarled at her.

"I beg your pardon?" Melissa asked.

"I said, you will not punish her." he said, his voice shifting back into its usual self-assured tones.

Melissa got up, her face a mask of ice. "Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Severus. She's an Auror. I expect certain standards from my Aurors, certain standards from all mages! And she's broken them. She acted like a Dark witch! I can't have someone who's no better than the ones she's meant to be arresting as my Deputy. And you! Don't you want to see justice done?"

"It already has been." said Severus firmly. "An innocent man, you called me? Come on, Mel, you know my past. I have committed atrocity after atrocity, and I enjoyed it. I never stood trial for any of those crimes, the survivors and the relatives of the ones who didn't make it never got any kind of recompense for their suffering. Until now." He shuddered. "Mel, I am not innocent. She did it to me because I did it to her first. She is what she is because of me. I should be in Azkaban. I should have been Dementor Kissed. I wasn't because I was more useful to the Ministry alive. Consider me the first of those miserable wretches who turned themselves in on her account." He smiled thinly. "Mel, I deserved it. In a way, I'm glad she did it. We're even now. The debt's settled. Maybe she can stop hating me now. Maybe she can get on with her life now. Maybe she can be happy now. It won't be with me, of that I am sure, but I'd like to see her smile again. I'd like to see her able to love again." A look of wistfulness crossed his features.

Melissa just gazed in disbelief. "Severus, you amaze me. She uses you, abuses you, treats you like you're filth, and what do you do? Worship at her feet and beg for more. Sev, wake up! Stop being so blindly in love with her and open your eyes! The woman is a brutal, violent psychopath!"

Severus sighed in blissful adoration. "Yes. She is, isn't she?"

"Severus!" Melissa screamed in frustration. "Snap out of it! She is no good for you! Aren't you at all interested in stopping her from doing that to anyone else?"

"She wouldn't do it to anyone else." Severus replied, serious once more. "She doesn't need to. She's expended her rage on me, and it's over. I'm the only one she harboured vengeance against and she's got it now. Mel, there is nothing to be gained from disciplining her, and a lot to lose. Where will you find another Deputy as gifted, talented and most importantly, loyal as her? The only other choice is Marcus Vetinari, and he's made no secret of having been after your job for years. You'd be mad to sack her. And if you try and bring any kind of case against her, I will not testify. You'd have to face the interesting challenge of trying her for a crime that there's no apparent victim to. Don't think I wouldn't lie for her sake." He gazed intently at her.

"There's other ways of acquiring evidence, Severus." said Melissa quietly, giving him the same look right back. "I don't need your testimony."

"You probably don't, do you?" Severus laughed. "All right, if you won't refrain for my sake or Caitlin's, how about your own god-daughter?"

"What about her?" said Melissa sharply.

"She's already fatherless; would you take away her mother too? Leave her orphaned? She adores her mother. She'd never forgive you if you sent her to Azkaban." Severus turned on his most persuasive manner. "It would tear her apart, Mel. Absolutely destroy her. Do you really want that? I don't think you do. Quite apart from anything else, I'm sure you want the Redemption to go ahead as much as I do."

"What does that have to do with anything?" said Melissa, bemused.

"Luella cannot do it without Deanna, of that I am sure. They need each other. If Deanna falls apart, Luella will follow. Maybe not immediately, but eventually. Luella is kind and compassionate, yes, but she does not have her friend's toughness. The strain will be too much for her without Deanna's support. And if Luella goes..." He let Melissa finish the sentence for herself.

He watched as she sank into a chair, defeated.

"Damn you, Severus." she said. "How do you manage it? All right. All right. I won't bring charges." She looked up sharply. "But I still mean to have words with her. I hope she's properly remorseful."

"As you wish, Mel." murmured Severus. "As you wish."

Caitlin jerked with a start as the door slammed open. Daylight. Now that wasn't good. She'd laid her head down on the desk for just a few moments at three in the morning to get some rest, and now...

Now she was being confronted by an angry Mel Lovegood storming in.

"Sleeping on the job, were we?" said Melissa scathingly. "Not good, Caitlin. Your reflexes are letting you down. Your standards are slipping, Tyler." She closed the

office door behind her and strode over to the desk, leaning over it, looking Caitlin dead in the eye.

"They are slipping indeed, Caitlin." Melissa said, the softness of her voice doing nothing to hide the menace beneath. "I saw Severus last night."

Caitlin was fully awake in a second. "Severus?" She swiftly recovered her usual poise. "What did he have to say for himself then?"

"Quite a bit, once I'd got past his defences. Caitlin Tyler, what the hell have you done??" Melissa's anger had changed to disbelief.

"I don't know what you're talking about." said Caitlin obstinately. She smiled her most charming smile, reserved for special occasions only. "Sit down, Mel, relax. You know Sevi, hardly a good word to say about anyone."

Melissa shut her eyes and looked away. "Don't even think about it, Caitlin. He told me what happened. What the hell were you thinking of?"

Caitlin turned off the Glamour with a sigh. Looked like she was cornered. "I did nothing to him that he has not done to others in his time." she said, staring back at Melissa with all the stubbornness she could gather. "I did nothing that he did not do to me."

Melissa sank wearily into a chair. "Caitlin, you little fool." she whispered. "Was it really necessary to break the law to do it? Are you so tormented by revenge that you have to stoop to our enemies' level? Do you have any idea what you've done to him?"

Caitlin pricked up her ears, intrigued. "No, what have I done to him?"

"You have shattered him, Caitlin. I have never seen him that badly hurt, never. Granted, his self-esteem has never exactly been high, but I've never seen it gone entirely. He considers himself worthless, the lowest of the low. He hates himself. Really loathes himself and his entire existence! Called himself subhuman and a disgrace to humanity. Proud of yourself, Caitlin?"

Caitlin had gone from being curious to wearing a strange, numb expression. When she did speak, her words came haltingly, from another plane entirely.

"He does know what it felt like for me then." she whispered. A look of dawning horror crossed her face. "Oh my god, Mel, what the hell have I done?? Sevi!" She shot to her feet, almost screaming the last word, and began pacing the room, head in her hands.

"What have I done to him, what have I done, he will never forgive me, never want me now, I've ruined everything, Hecate help me Mel, what have I done???"

Melissa watched, anger fading into a detached mixture of surprise, relief, amusement and the familiar and welcome urge to manipulate. Clearly Caitlin wasn't as far gone into hatred as she'd thought. There was hope yet.

"You know, that's not a million miles away from what he said to me." she said casually. "Don't lose hope just yet. For instance, it's largely down to him that you're not currently on your way to Azkaban pending an official inquiry and a court case. He said that if I did any such thing he'd refuse to testify. I don't know what you did to deserve it, but evidently you've not killed off his feelings for you entirely."

Caitlin stopped pacing and spun round. "He did that? He was willing to lie to keep me out of trouble?"

Melissa nodded. She watched as a smile of relief began to creep across her friend's features.

"He still cares about me?" Caitlin whispered.

"He does." Melissa said, suppressing the urge to grin in favour of her usual cool exterior. "I wouldn't push your luck just yet though. I think it's done quite enough for you lately."

"I have to go to him." said Caitlin, her every word strangled. She immediately collected her things together. "I have to see him, I have to talk to him, have to make him understand."

"I'm not stopping you." said Melissa, calm once more. She got up and settled herself down in her usual chair, firmly behind the desk. "I'll sort out things here. You go. Have a rest or something, you look shattered."

"Yes, yes I will." said Caitlin as she made for the door. Before she left, she turned to face Melissa once more. "Thank you, Mel." she said quietly.

"You're welcome." said Melissa, smiling as the door closed and she was able to return to her work once more. It looked like The Project was back on again. Caitlin made straight for home out of habit. No good seeing Severus looking less than her best after all.

One look in the mirror stopped her in her tracks.

"I can't face him like this!" she whispered. The late night showed. Dark circles under the eyes, hair in desperate need of doing something with, skin pale, robes crumpled and looking her age for once, Caitlin Tyler was not at her best.

"All right, all right, calm down CT, let's take one thing at a time here." she said to herself. Shower. Before anything else, a shower. Then a coffee. Then breakfast, perhaps. And then, time to get dressed, do her make-up and head out.

However, over breakfast, sat at the table in her silk kimono with a slice of toast in one hand and a mug of strong coffee in the other, her resolve to see Severus began to fade. After all, it wasn't like it couldn't wait for a few hours. It was Saturday, he wouldn't be teaching, she could see him in the afternoon. Right now, her prime desire was to do something she hadn't done for a long time, and spend the day having a little fun. More

specifically, she wanted the sun on her back, the wind in her hair, and something strong, powerful and speedy helping her achieve it.

Half an hour later, she was going through her wardrobe, dredging up outfits she'd not worn since the Seventies. Very tasteful, she, thought, giving an old lime green shirt that Lily had talked her into buying the once-over, shaking her head in disbelief at some of the things she'd used to wear regularly. However, it wasn't the psychedelic relics that she was after, but something a little more cutting edge. Finally, searching among the flares and fleeces, each one complete with its own little three piece luggage set of memories, she found them. A black leather jacket and matching trousers, along with a set of black sunglasses and a pair of black steel capped biker boots. It hadn't been Lily who'd persuaded her to buy these.

Let's hope they still fit me, she thought to herself. It wasn't like she'd put on a lot of weight since, and she did work out daily. However, there was no getting away from the fact that it had been a long time since she'd last worn them. She held her breath as she wrestled the trousers on. And let it out again with relief when not only did they fit, they actually fit her better than they had done in her twenties.

They were followed by her favourite black Lycra vest, the jacket, a hairbrush run swiftly through her hair, a black cloak and the sunglasses. Well, that was the outfit. Now, just one last thing.

No need to look far, she knew where they were even if she'd not touched them since she'd got them. In a box at the back of her wardrobe, long undisturbed, a physical emblem of one particularly nasty set of emotional baggage, crammed full of letters, photos, cards, papers and miscellaneous souvenirs from down Memory Lane, she found what she was looking for, tucked in a side compartment. A completely innocuous set of keys and a pair of black leather gloves.

She held them in her fingers for a while, remembering. The gloves were hers, but the keys weren't, not really. She'd been given the keys to hold in trust for a friend of hers. Just for a while, until he returned to claim his property. He never had, and it had stayed with her ever since, unused. Until now.

Wand in hand, she stepped out into the sunshine, and shook back her hair. A look in the mirror before leaving had thoroughly restored her sense of her own gorgeousness, and all in all, she was ready for anything. Ten minutes later, she was in Gringotts. The goblins were down among the Tyler vaults, retrieving the article she was here for, yet another remnant of her past being hauled out into the light for exorcism.

She turned and watched as it took five of them to wheel it out. The chatter in the bank fell silent as it gleamed in the light streaming in through the windows. Caitlin felt her heart leap. Although it would need testing before she could be completely sure, it looked like the Preservation Charms she'd laid on it before consigning it to its maximum security oubliette had held good.

"Thank you." she smiled, tipping the goblins for their trouble. They bowed and returned to their work. Ignoring the looks everyone was giving her, she let her wand travel over it, checking that it would still work.

"OK, OK, this seems in order." she murmured, releasing the Preservation Charms. "Now let's see how you shape up in action."

She slipped her wand back into its holder, and felt for her keys, her fingers locating the Harley Davidson fob and using it to pull them out. She paused before putting them into use.

There was no doubt about it, this was a superb machine. All chrome piping and black leather, made in 1957 in Detroit by a Muggle called Harley Davidson, restored and magically enhanced in Britain in 1974 by two young Aurors called Sirius Black and Caitlin Tyler.

A bittersweet smile crossed her face. He may have been a Gryffindor, but somehow they'd understood each other implicitly. He'd fallen in love with her, of course. And it had been fun, restoring the bike with him, turning it into something straight out of a Meat Loaf video, him teaching her how to ride it, flying together under the moonlight. They weren't lovers, she'd always turned him down, never losing hope that one day Severus Snape would stop obsessing over her best friend and notice her, but they'd always been close. He'd supported her when she'd been pregnant, and she still wondered what would have happened if... Stop it, Cait. Stop thinking about him, she scolded herself. He turned traitor, remember? Killed your best friend, remember? And this bike is yours now, all yours. After all, they've no use for Harleys in Azkaban.

Climbing onto the bike, she pulled on her gloves, inserted the keys and fired the engine into life, causing more than a few screams. Putting on her sunglasses, she grinned cheerfully at the shocked mages watching her.

"Trust me, I'm an Auror!" she laughed to one particularly handsome young wizard nearby, giving him a mischievous wink, before putting her foot down and steering the bike out of Gringotts, gathering speed as everyone dived out of the way. Hair flying back in the breeze, she cast a glamour around the bike to ensure invisibility, tweaked one of the controls that Sirius had added, and yelled in exhilaration as the bike went airborne. She was clear of Diagon Alley in seconds. Turning the bike around, she headed North, the wind in her hair, sun on her back and her heart lighter than it had been for years, riding to a date with her destiny. "Well? Are you going to talk to him?"

Deanna looked up in annoyance at the fool who had dared interrupt her breakfast. She was unsurprised to see Draco parking himself next to her.

"I am eating my breakfast, Malfoy."

"Yeah, but are you going to talk to him today?" said Draco, nothing if not persistent.

"I told you last night I would." said Deanna. "And I will. When I've had my breakfast."

"When will that be?" said Draco, fed up.

"When I'm full. Listen Malfoy, I know you like to stuff your food down and move on before it's even reached your stomach, but some of us prefer to savour our meals. These things cannot be rushed."

"But Tyler...!" whined Draco.

"I don't want to hear it! And don't whine at me like that. Do you have any idea how irritating it is? I will speak to him today, when I am ready. And not before! Now shut up, unless you want me to make you repeat the Quidditch related phrase I had you say last night in front of the whole school."

"No, Tyler." muttered Draco. He let his eyes wander around the room until they lighted on Ginny. "How well do you know Weasley's sister?" he asked.

"A little. Why?" said Deanna, the experience of years causing her to remain on her guard.

"I'm just wondering why she got put here when everything about her background screams Gryffindor. She's not obviously Slytherin material as far as I can see."

"From what I gather, she's been poor all her life and is getting a bit sick of it. That, Malfoy, is why. And if you're thinking she's not cut out for life as a Slyth, then think again. I'm certain she has Slytherin qualities there somewhere, she just needs time to develop them." Deanna recalled the Ginny meeting of the first night of term. "Which reminds me, Malfoy. I am warning you now. If I hear that either you or your friends have been treating Miss Weasley anything less than honourably, I shall be forced to come down hard on you. Understand me, Malfoy?"

"Loud and clear, Tyler." said Draco, unbothered. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected Deanna and company to take Ginny under their collective wings after all. "It's far more fun tormenting her brother anyway."

Deanna rolled her eyes. "You never get tired of picking on those three, do you?"

"But it's such fun! Weasel's so easy to manipulate, Mudblood shouldn't even be here by rights, and as for Potter..." Draco fell silent, gazing at Harry with a strange, hungry look. "I will show him who's best." he said softly. "Oh yes. I will." Deanna had never had much time for Draco Malfoy, but she rarely if ever broke her word. So it was that she hauled Luella out of the common room for a bit of moral support.

"Come on, Lu, Snapey's evidently been acting weirdly lately, and you and I are the ones best placed to find out why. Malfoy's not the type to come and ask for my assistance for no reason."

Privately, Luella agreed with her. However, she could also guess what was behind it all.

"Deanna, are you sure about this? I mean, Malfoy could be imagining things. Or it could be some kind of prank on his part."

"Lu, Malfoy may be an annoying and obnoxious little brat, but he is not stupid. If he says Snape is acting strangely and is breaking the habit of a lifetime by actually treating Gryffindor and Slytherin on equal terms, then there is something behind it. I'm certain it's not a prank either - why would Malfoy risk certain humiliation by asking me, of all people, for help? It doesn't make sense. No, there's something up here. Anyway, I promised."

"Yeah, you promised." said Luella, desperate for a way of getting out of this. "Why do you need me along? Surely you can talk to Snape on your own? I mean, you're one of his favourite students after all."

"So, Luella Martin, are you. I need back up, I need someone to give me a hand, maybe look out for things I might miss. Don't tell me you're scared." Deanna's tone of voice indicated that any answer other than no would result in a whole term's worth of mockery and derision. Luella knew better than to risk it.

"Of course not. I'm just not sure I want to find out about his private life. It could be quite personal!" Well, that much was true anyway.

"Blimey Lu, I'm just enquiring as to why he's suddenly favouring Gryffindor, I'm not doing a profile for 'This Is Your Life'. Stop worrying, he's hardly likely to tell a couple of students all the gory details of his private life, is he?"

Luella could only wish she didn't know better. "I know, but all the same, there's such a thing as too much information. Deanna, there's some things we're better off not knowing." Things like being in love with your House Master. Things like said House Master being an ex-Death Eater. And being your best friend's father. And your best friend's mother having recently beaten him up and done gods knew what else to him. Only thing worse than having to hide all that was having to be in a room with said House Master and said best friend while said best friend was unknowingly probing into all the secrets she was meant to be keeping hidden.

"You worry too much, Lu." said Deanna. "Anyhow, we're here." She led Luella into the classroom and knocked on Snape's office door.

"Come in." they heard him say, in his usual indolent tones. Deanna pushed the door open.

Snape glanced up, and immediately froze. Luella noticed the look of fear in his eyes before they glazed over again, and winced. Particularly worrying was the look she'd seen him give her, one of smouldering anger. This did not bode well.

However, his outward manner was charming enough.

"Good afternoon, ladies. And what brings you here? Not trouble I hope."

Deanna exchanged looks with Luella. Now that they were actually here, Deanna realised that she had no idea where to even begin talking. One panic-stricken look at Luella removed any hope of support there; her friend's attitude was all too obviously one of 'this was your idea, you get on with it'. Well, no help for it now.

Deanna slid gracefully into a chair. "Not as such. I gather you took some points off Malfoy yesterday."

"I may have done." Snape replied carelessly. "Why do you ask? It's hardly unusual for a teacher to take points off a misbehaving student, is it now?"

"It is when you're the teacher and the student in question's a Slytherin. You never take points off Malfoy. Never. What gives?" Deanna gave him her renowned Penetrating Look. Luella tried to look unobtrusive as Snape gave Deanna the exact same look right back.

"He was breaking school rules. Miss Tyler, are you trying to tell me my job?"

"No, sir." said Deanna hastily. "Just that it seemed a little out of character for you. Lu and I were wondering if everything was OK."

Luella sank lower into her chair, staring fixedly at the ground. It didn't save her from noticing the extremely icy look that Snape was giving her.

"Were you now. How touching." he said, voice dripping with sarcasm, his eyes not leaving Luella for a minute. "Well, you need not trouble yourselves on my account. I don't believe my personal life is any of your concern, but let me assure you that I am quite capable of dealing with it without any help from you."

Didn't seem that way the other night, Luella thought to herself. However, wisdom dictated an entirely different course of action.

Getting to her feet and flinging a low strength glamour around herself, she grabbed Deanna by the arm.

"See? I told you he was fine. Right, you've kept your word to Malfoy, let's go." She turned to Snape, flashing her best smile. "Sorry to have bothered you, sir. I did try and talk her out of it, but she would insist. Come on, Deanna."

"Lu, what the hell...?" protested Deanna as she found herself hauled to her feet. "I'm not done yet!"

"Oh, I think we are." said Luella, dragging her friend doorwards. She glanced back at Snape. The anger appeared to have abated, and he was now raising an eyebrow at her, looking as if he were trying not to laugh. Well, better laughter than fury, she thought. Betraying Severus Snape's trust was, as she knew all too well from her own past, not a smart move.

They were disturbed by a noise from outside. Someone had just kicked the classroom door open and was now making firmly for the office door. Someone wearing steel-capped boots by the sound of it.

The door burst open. Deanna stopped wriggling in Luella's grip immediately.

"Mum?" she gasped.

Caitlin stopped dead in her tracks on seeing her daughter.

"Deanna!" Mother and daughter said nothing more, just staring in surprise. Deanna looked her mother over, suddenly realising she'd not seen that particular outfit before.

"Mum, you're wearing leather!" said Deanna in horror.

"So?" said Caitlin, defensively.

"So suppose someone I know sees you dressed like that! Good gods, Mum, you look indecent! For Hera's sake go and put some clothes on! Please!" begged Deanna.

Luella glanced at Snape, wondering how he was taking the sudden entrance of a leather-clad Caitlin Tyler. Then she remembered.

"What are you doing here." she said, her voice letting Caitlin know exactly what she thought of her.

"I'm on a social call." said Caitlin. She scrutinised Luella carefully, seemingly sizing her up, before a look of understanding seemed to dawn. She gazed at Luella for a while, before looking at her daughter, seemingly doing some extremely quick thinking. Then, her attention turned to Snape.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. Luella shivered as a connection composed of love and hate and remorse and longing and who knew what else sparked between them. Then, Snape looked away, breaking the link with a look on his face that said all too obviously "This is too much; this hurts."

Deanna looked from one to the other, clearly picking up on it too but not knowing what to make of it. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice trembling, sounding much younger than she actually was. "Mum?"

"Deanna, go. Just go." said Caitlin, distracted. "Now."

Luella grabbed her friend's arm. "Come on. I think this is one of those things you're best off not knowing." She bundled Deanna out of the door, but before following her out, she turned to look at Snape and Caitlin. While Deanna was certainly best off out of it, she was far less keen on leaving Snape alone with her mother.

Caitlin, however, was having none of it. "Both of you." she said pointedly.

"Professor?" Luella said, ignoring Caitlin entirely.

"Luella. Go." he said, his eyes on Caitlin. "I'll deal with this."

"Are you sure...?"

"Yes." said Snape firmly. "This is between Caitlin and myself." Deanna turned to Luella as soon as they were both out in the corridor.

"Well? What the hell was going on there? And don't tell me you don't know! I saw the way you were looking at Mum. Something's wrong, isn't it?" Deanna said, somehow managing to combine desperation with the Look That Needs No Description.

Luella squirmed uneasily. Deanna was clearly owed some kind of explanation, and yet the truth would never do. Not all of it anyway.

"All right, all right. They had some kind of fight."

"A fight? What sort of fight? Verbal? Physical? When, when were they meeting up?" Deanna fired the questions at her in quick succession, seeking all the gory details, mind running wild with concern for them both.

"Last week. I think they were having one of their regular Redeemer Update Sessions. Anyway, it got physical."

"Physical... Did he hit my mother??" snarled Deanna, drawing her wand and preparing to head straight back in there. Luella grabbed her arm.

"No! She hit him. I ran into him while he was on his way back - I'd been having a restless night and wanted some Sleeping Potion. He looked in an awful state. He must have said something he shouldn't, something to really wind her up. He looked like she'd given it her worst. Ended up healing him, although he wouldn't tell me what happened. I guessed it was her though, from the way he was all quiet and not saying anything much."

Deanna put her wand away, staring at Luella in shock. "My mother... beat him up? Oh my god." She folded one arm across her chest, the other holding her head. "So that's why he was acting so strangely. Oh Hades, Lu." She wiped her eyes, looking at her friend in abject misery. "I suppose that's why she's here, to apologise. Bloody hell. Poor Snapey. Damn it Lu, why do they have to fight? Can't they just have a civil conversation and get on with each other? Can't they just relax and enjoy each other's company? I thought they were friends, why do they have to hurt each other so much?" Her voice cracked, and she swiftly hid her eyes. Luella stepped forward and comforted her, pulling her into an embrace. Deanna returned it, slipping her arms gratefully around her friend's waist and burying her head on her shoulder. Luella gently smoothed her hair.

"Don't cry, mate. It'll be OK. They'll patch things up, you'll see." Luella didn't really believe it, but nevertheless she hated seeing Deanna upset. Which meant there was only one thing for it.

"Hey. Tyler." Deanna looked up, straight into Luella's eyes. Luella smiled tenderly and wiped the tears away before continuing.

"Forget. Forget you ever saw your mother here today. We left empty-handed after Snape refused to tell us anything. You're none the wiser about what's going on, but you reckon he was just having an off-day."

Deanna went into the familiar trance before shaking herself and blinking. She sniffed before speaking.

"Think I'm getting a cold, Lu, I'm really snuffly at the moment. Got any tissues?"

"Back at the dorm. So. Any thoughts?"

"None. And you were a fat lot of good there, weren't you? Said nothing then dragged me out of there before I could get anything out of him. Nice one, Lu."

"Sorry, DT. But he didn't seem very co-operative there, did he? He clearly wasn't going to tell us. We'll just tell Malfoy he was having an off-day or something."

"Fair enough." said Deanna. "Now, about those tissues. Come to think of it, my eyes feel really weird too. Sore, like I've been rubbing them."

"Come back to the dorm and wash your face. Maybe that'll sort you out. Probably something down here getting in your eyes." said Luella, attempting to distract her.

"Suppose. Come on, let's get back. You make up something to get Malfoy off our backs while I sort myself out." And with that, Deanna headed for the common room. Caitlin waited until she heard the classroom door closing before sitting down. Now she was actually here, she had no idea what to say to him. Severus was watching her, apparently calm, his features betraying little hint of emotion. However, Caitlin was not Deputy Head of the DDAE for no reason. She could read all the little physical signs, the stiffness, the hands clenching the arms of his chair, the slight lean away from her, all the little indications that Severus was on his guard and ready to defend himself if need be. Most of all the eyes, eyes that had once regarded her with affection, but were now little pools of fear. He doesn't trust me anymore, she thought in despair. Maybe he will never trust me again.

"What are you here for, Caitlin?" he asked, his voice brusque and defensive, with a sneer that she knew better than anyone was designed not to mock but to keep her at bay. "Not had enough of tormenting me yet? Cruciatus not enough for you? Why not use the other two on me as well, make a clean sweep of it?"

"Sevi..." she began. He cut her short.

"My name" he said, "is Severus."

Caitlin quietly gave thanks for her training. It made hiding pain so much easier.

"All right then. Severus." she said. She recalled Mel's words, that Severus had pointblank refused to assist in any prosecution attempt. Hard to reconcile that with the angry, hostile and above all, frightened man in front of her.

"Mel told me you'd managed to talk her out of prosecuting me." said Caitlin. "I... I wanted to say thank you."

"Well, at least you're properly grateful. You might be a violent, vengeful Harpy, but at least you're a well-mannered violent, vengeful Harpy." said Severus.

"Why'd you do it, Severus?" asked Caitlin, emotion starting to come through. "Why did you stop her? What's wrong with you, why didn't you want justice done? I would have done."

"I know." said Severus. "I know you did." He seemed to relax a little, evidently reassured that she was not about to pick up where she'd left off. "Let me get one thing quite clear, Caitlin. I didn't do it out of the goodness of my heart. I most certainly did not do it out of love for you. I did it because I don't want to see Deanna motherless as well. And I did it because I think that justice has been done already." Finally, he met her eyes. Caitlin winced, but it wasn't the pain in them that caused it. It was the accompanying emotion of cold, cruel indifference. "We're even now, Caitlin. You don't owe me anything, and more importantly, I don't owe you. The score is settled. You can try all you like to manipulate me, play on my sense of guilt about my past wrongs, try and punish me anew with each meeting as if I'm some latter-day Prometheus. But it won't work. As far I'm concerned, justice has been done. I've had my punishment, and it's equal to anything the Dementors could dish out. Congratulations, Caitlin. In a twisted kind of way, you've finally laid my past to rest. The price of that is that you'll never be able to use it against me again. You've lost that power. So don't even bother playing the traumatised victim for me anymore. We are even. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Severus." said Caitlin, somehow managing to avoid crying. She got to her feet. "Guess there's little point in me sticking around, is there?"

"No, not really." said Severus, his attention now returning to the lesson plans he'd been working on before.

"I'll just go then, shall I?" said Caitlin, moving slowly towards the door, wanting to give him one last chance to stop her leaving, one last chance to give in and come after her.

"If you could. Close the door on your way out, won't you?" said Severus, with a coolness that he surely did not feel.

Caitlin turned away with a heavy heart. If Severus did still harbour any affection for her, he was doing a good job of hiding it. She'd been a fool to think she could salvage anything now. However, there was one last thing she owed him.

She turned back to face him as she stood by the door, her hand poised on the handle as she prepared to leave.

"Severus, I... I'm sorry." she said, not looking at him. He didn't answer. Then, without anything further for her to say, she was gone, the door closing behind her.

Severus did not move as he heard her leave. He waited, poised, holding his breath, waiting for the tell-tale slam of the classroom door that told him she was well on her way and not coming back. Then, and only then, did he move again, slumping forward

onto the desk, head in hands, and begin to weep for what could have been. Melissa was not surprised to see Caitlin on her front doorstep that evening. She was, however, amazed by the method of transport that she'd used.

"Cait, isn't that...?"

"Yes, it is the Horned Angel." said Caitlin, sounding too tired to care. "I retrieved it from my Gringotts vaults this morning. Felt the need to go riding again. Still works too - managed to get it to Hogwarts then back here in a single day. If it gets me home, that's five hundred miles in a day. Pretty good going given it's over thirty years old." She walked into Melissa's study and slumped into a chair, feeling her thirty five years and looking utterly dispirited. Melissa quietly instructed Sukey to fetch two cups of tea and then ensure they were not disturbed.

Melissa listened as Caitlin poured out the story of her encounter with Severus, clutching a mug of hot tea, staring at the patterns made by the steam as they twirled delicately into the air.

"It's over, Mel." said Caitlin, listless and lifeless. "He didn't say it in so many words, but it's over between us. He can't bear me anywhere near him. Do you know what he said to me?" She shivered as she recalled the words. "He said we were even now. That there was nothing either of us owed the other. Said I could never hurt him again. No words of love. No forgiveness. Just... this indifference. As if he didn't give a damn any more. He doesn't love me any more, I've lost him, lost him, lost him!" Caitlin began to sob. "Why the hell did it take me so long? Just as soon as I realise how much he means to me, I go and ruin everything! Any time these last three years, he was mine for the taking, and what do I do? Turn him down. Gods, Mel, why am I such a fool?" She was crying openly by now.

Melissa soothed her. "Don't blame yourself, Caitlin. Anyway, you didn't realise how much he meant to you until now, did you? Right up until last week you blamed him for everything that had gone wrong in your life and hated him with a passion. Now you've forgiven him and realised you're still in love with him. And why is that?"

"Because I'm a stupid, vengeful Harpy?" suggested Caitlin.

"No." said Melissa. "Because you've finally got rid of your hatred. Cait, listen. Maybe this is the best thing that could have happened."

"The best thing?! Mel, if this is the best thing, what was the worst?"

"Think about it." said Melissa. "Severus said you're even now. True, he gave it its worst connotation. But it's also true in a more positive light. You've got rid of your resentment and bitterness towards him. While he can stop blaming himself and giving himself the mental punishment he feels he deserves. You've both been gifted with a golden opportunity to offload your worst mental traumas. Yeah, you're brokenhearted, but you'll get over it. In fact, I'd say you're a lot more emotionally healthy tonight than you've been in years. You're healing already. And he doesn't seem that badly affected. After all, he feels he deserves it, as punishment for his Death Eater days. It was pretty traumatic for him, but he's able to give it some kind of meaning and come to terms

with it. He's healing too. Give him time, Cait. You both need time away from each other, to get your heads together. One day, mate. One day, when you've both sorted your lives out and realised how much you miss each other. One day, you'll see that familiar raven on your windowsill with the letter asking you to meet up. And you'll tart yourself up, go to meet him, fall straight into his arms and the two of you'll never be apart again. You'll see."

"I hope you're right." sighed Caitlin. "Because I don't know what I'll do if you're not." She drank her tea and sat back, gazing into the distance. "You know, I've never really loved anyone else. I know this sounds crazy, but I can't imagine life without him. I really can't. There's no one else I want, no one else I can imagine wanting. Every dream, every fantasy, every man I've ever had, they've all been him really. Always it's been him I've thought of. Not loving him is something I can't envisage at all. Damn Mel, I want him so badly!"

"He wants you too." said Melissa, the conviction in her voice not wavering for an instant. "He still loves you. I saw it in his voice, in his eyes. It goes both ways, Cait. As long as you are alive, there will never really be anyone else for him. He will forgive you, Cait, for the simple reason that being without you will hurt him far more!"

"You think so?" Caitlin asked, hope beginning to dawn.

"I know so!" said Melissa. "He just needs time. Time on his own, so he can start to miss you." A sly grin, not unlike her daughter's favoured expression, began to show itself. Caitlin couldn't help responding to it, starting to grin conspiratorially herself.

"See? You're cheering up already." said Melissa. "Now, obviously I can't have you working together on the Redeemer Project any more. You'll both be involved still, but you'll report to me instead of each other, while I'll make sure any vital information is passed on. How's that sound?"

"He won't have to see me, yet he'll still have to hear about and think about me." mused Caitlin. "Then there's the living reminder of his past walking around in front of him every day at Hogwarts, my darling daughter. Just being around her will remind him of me, and I can't see Severus wanting to distance himself from her. She might have his hair and eyes, but she's got my mannerisms and my playful streak. She's got my walk, did you know that? And she twirls her hair around her fingers when she's bored like I do. She's got my creativity and chutzpah too - I was always the one with the crazy schemes at school as well. Severus was always far too cautious to do anything like that. That famous cheek and nerve of hers comes straight from me. Every time he talks to her, it'll be like being in a room with me. Ah, Sevi, you won't escape so easily!" Caitlin laughed, cackling like the witch she was. "The Fates have woven our lives together, how can you possibly think to cut me off? It would be like slicing off your own hand. No, you'll never get me out of your head. Even if I'm far away, in another man's arms, I'll always be right by your side, there with every breath you take, there every time you wake, there when you close your eyes. I'll be in your every dream, I'll be the first thing on your mind when you wake up, the last thing on your mind when you fall asleep and not even the Draught of Living Death will give you any respite. Your heart is mine, your soul is mine, your body is mine, you belong

to me, you have no future without me! And until you accept it and surrender, you'll suffer the pain of knowing a part of your psyche is missing, the pain of knowing you're incomplete without me. As I do swear it, so mote it be!" Caitlin slammed down the mug, her eyes alive with an unholy fire. She shook back her hair and laughed in exhilaration. "Damn, Mel, that felt good!"

Melissa was gazing at her with a look that combined respect with a mild fear for Caitlin's sanity.

"Cait, you are something else, you know that? Were you Medea in a past life or something?"

"Strange you should say that, it was my mother's name." grinned Caitlin. "Medea Deanna Tyler. There's an old legend that claims the original Medea as an ancestor of ours. Don't know if it's true, but our family's littered with Medeas, not all of whom bore that name."

"Well, you could rival the original any day." said Melissa, shivering a little. "Caitlin, you're just a bit too good at making spine-chilling prophecies. Must be your Welsh roots coming through."

"It's a traditional skill of Tal-y-Rhys witches, and Welsh witches in general." said Caitlin. "Well, who knows what will happen. I'm not Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, after all. But he won't get away from me. I've waited for him to notice me ever since we were teens. I can wait a little longer. One way or another, he'll be mine. Oh yes." said Caitlin, her eyes burning with the certainty of a fanatic, heavily laced with a good dose of obsession. "He shall be mine."

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Chapter Seven A Day of Reckoning

It came as quite a shock to Luella to realise that it was Halloween already. The term seemed to have flown by.

Her friends, however, had other things on their minds. As far as Deanna and Marlie were concerned, the only topic worthy of consideration was Quidditch.

"Do you reckon we can do it this year?" asked Deanna.

"First team or reserves?" asked Marlie, busily engaged in planning a strategy for the first Slytherin Reserves game of the season. True to form, she'd not spent long mourning her demotion, but had immediately assumed the vacant Reserve Seeker position and the reserve team captaincy.

"Either." said Deanna. "First team. Reckon Malfoy's any good?"

"He's a good flier." said Marlie, giving nothing away. "I'd say he has the skill. However..."

"However what?" asked Deanna.

"He's not disciplined enough." said Marlie. "Look at him, the way he's approaching the Gryffindor game."

Deanna looked at Draco. "He seems pretty fired up about it. Obsessed, almost."

"Exactly." said Marlie. "His whole emotional being is hung up on Harry. He hates him to the point of obsession. He's not in Quidditch for the sporting aspect, he's there purely because Harry Potter is Seeker for his team, and anything Potter has, Malfoy has to have as well, and ideally go one better. You seriously don't think it was an accident that it was Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones that Malfoy wanted, do you? No, Malfoy wants to beat Potter. Which will prove his downfall in the end."

"How do you mean?" Deanna asked, fascinated. Marlie might not be taken seriously by most of her house but everyone respected her opinion on Quidditch.

"He's too emotional." said Marlie, toying idly with her quill, coolly weighing up her cousin's mental state. "In order to play Quidditch well, you need a clear head. You need to want to win, yet at the same time, be detached from it all. You need to be focused. Malfoy isn't. He's obsessed. That's not the same thing. His desire is ruling him. He's not in control of himself and it'll affect his game. As long as he has that Potter obsession, he'll never beat him."

"Never?"

"Never. You just wait, Tyler, the first team are really going to regret dropping me. He's not the player I am. I know that sounds arrogant, but it's true!"

"So what are you going to do about it?" asked Deanna.

"Nothing," said Marlie.

"Nothing?" gasped Deanna. "Come on, Marls. You're a Slyth. You must have some kind of game plan."

"My only ambition at the moment is to lead the reserves to victory. I've got a point to prove, DT. Our reserves are shocking, at least they were last year. Possibly their biggest flaw was not having a permanent Seeker. That's now sorted out at least. Anyway, I've put together a stable line-up, got rid of a few individuals who were insufficiently enthusiastic, trained you all hard, and put together a strategy. I think we can beat every other reserve team in the school, for the simple reason that all the other houses neglect their reserves in favour of the first team. The reserve trophy's ours."

"Yeah, but surely you're not telling me that there's no grand plan to unseat Malfoy." said Deanna, not believing for a second that Marlie didn't have something in mind.

"Deanna, if I was as obsessive and hate-ridden as him, there would be, but as it is... Besides, I really don't think I need one. His own flaws will hopefully do the job for me. Flint will regret ever picking him, and when they all see what I've done with the reserves, they'll start changing their minds."

"And what if that doesn't happen?" asked Deanna.

"Then we'll start taking action to make sure it does." said Marlie calmly. "Right, back to team strategy. OK, so I'm Seeker/Captain. Keeper: Alex Lynch. Beaters: Crabbe and Goyle. Chasers: Lucas Vetinari, Winter Montague and you. Reckon it'll do?"

"Hmm. It's not actually that experienced a line-up, is it? Yes, Alex is good and has been in the reserves since his second year. Winter joined at the same time, but let's face it, he's not the best, is he? Lucas is new on the team this year, and so, for that matter am I. Also bear in mind I could never do any flying as a kid on account of living in a Muggle neighbourhood, pure-blood though I am."

"Yes, but you have talent, kid!" said Marlie. "You were the second best flier in our first year. You've got in a fair bit of practice on the school brooms ever since. And you now have a broom of your own, namely my old Cleansweep Six." Mike Lovegood, as a way of making peace with his sister, had given her his old broom, a speedy Cleansweep Seven. While the ice hadn't exactly thawed, it did mean that they were now talking again.

"True. Although Mum reckons she's getting me a new one for Christmas. Reckons that a couple of Ravenclaws she knew at school have just set up their own broom company and will have their first prototype ready by Christmas. She's managed to persuade them to knock a ready-to-fly one out for me to, erm, test. It won't be a professional standard broom, but Mum says it'll be a match even for Malfoy's Nimbus."

"Cool!" gasped Marlie. "What's the company called? Ask if they'll do six more! We'll wear their logos on our robes if they like - if they're a new company they'll need the publicity surely?"

"Can't remember. Firebird, Fireball, something like that. I'll ask. Put pressure on your mum too, she's always been able to talk my mum into things like that. You know, I hope they're good brooms after all this - if they turn out to be rubbish I'll sulk."

"They won't. Your mum was Slytherin Chaser herself once, wasn't she? She knows her brooms." Marlie sounded more confident than she'd done for a long time. "We, Tyler, are sorted."

The two girls gave each other a high-five of triumph. Deanna noticed Luella watching them, bemused and just a little patronising.

"Hey, Lu. What's up? And stop looking at us like that. We're planning the kicking of Malfoy's arse and eventual Slytherin domination."

Luella could only sigh ruefully. "All this fuss over seven flying sticks and some enchanted balls. It's only a game, you two!"

"Only a game!" Marlie and Deanna blinked in disbelief.

"Quidditch is not only a game!" snapped Marlie. "It's a mystical experience! A way of expanding your horizons and achieving spiritual oneness with the universe, flier and broom in perfect harmony. Only a game, I ask you! Tyler, tell her."

"Lu, some of us happen to like Quidditch. There have been fights over this game. Blood has been spilt. Wars have been waged. It is important! And we're going to use it to kick Malfoy's arse."

Luella just shook her head. "Says a lot more about the emptiness of some people's lives than it does about the thing itself. But I'll take your word for it. Either of you two seen Rianne, by the way? I was going to ask her for a hand with my History of Magic essay."

Marlie rolled her eyes. "Need you ask? Curled up in *my* beanbag with *my* Game Boy playing with *my* Tetris game. Honestly, I spent all summer adapting the thing and now I'm here, I can't use it because Rianne 'I'm not addicted, honest' Stormosi keeps nicking it!" Marlie pouted.

"At least she's got the earphones on." Luella pointed out. "It could be worse, we could have to put up with the music as well."

"You wouldn't." said Deanna. "The reason being that after the third evening of hearing that tune over and over again, that machine would be in bits on the floor." She ignored Marlie's wince. "There's only a certain number of times you can hear it without going completely nuts."

"Don't worry, Marls." said Luella soothingly. "It survived being thrown violently across the room after Deanna kept getting repeatedly killed on the third level of Super Mario Brothers, after all."

"A very good thing I had the foresight to Deanna-proof it." sighed Marlie. "If only I'd Rianne-proofed it too. Who would have thought such a noted pure-blood could get so addicted to a Muggle toy?" She got up, determined to get her game back. One Summoning Charm later and it was in her hands, with Rianne staring in shock at the space where the screen had once been.

"What did you do that for?" screamed Rianne. "I'll lose my game! I was doing really well too!"

"Not any more." said Marlie, casually switching it off. "Besides, I have Mario Bros to finish, and I can't do that if you're always on it playing with your bloody building blocks. Honestly Ri, you're addicted, aren't you?"

"Am not." said Rianne sulkily. "I can stop playing Tetris any time I want to."

"Just walk away, can you?" asked Deanna, grinning. "Just put the Game Boy down and not feel any desire or craving to touch it at all?"

"Of course I can." said Rianne. "Just like that. I don't need Tetris to amuse me in the slightest."

"Go on then." said Marlie. Rianne went pale.

"What?"

"I said, go on then." Marlie said, a look of cool amusement firmly in place. "Let's see you. I, Marlie Lovegood, bet you, Rianne Stormosi, that you cannot go for a whole month without playing Tetris and not have a nervous breakdown in the process."

"You're not serious." said Rianne.

"Oh, I am." said Marlie, grinning. "I bet you can't do it."

"I bet I can." said Rianne, warming to the challenge. "What's at stake? Money?"

"No, not money. Pride." Marlie said, considering the possibilities. At last, one came to her. "If I win, you, for one game only, must join the Slytherin reserves. I'll organise a friendly with the Gryffindor reserves, and you play as Seeker in my place, using my broom. How's that?"

"Fiendish, Lovegood, fiendish." said Rianne. "OK, it's a deal. But if I win, then you have to do something for me."

"Like what?" asked Marlie languidly.

"Write my Defence Against the Dark Arts essays for me."

"What?" cried Marlie.

"I mean it. I can't stand the git. And I am sick to the back teeth of not getting any decent marks because I've got too much pride to grovel to his precious ego. You, on the other hand, appear to be getting top marks in that subject for the first time in your life."

"I can't help it if I'm naturally good." murmured Marlie, blushing.

Rianne looked sceptical. "Hmm. Well, be that as it may, you appear to be very good at that subject all of a sudden. So, if I win the bet, you're going to restore my marks back to their rightful total by writing my essays for me. Still keen on the idea, Marls?"

Marlie opened and shut her mouth a few times in fury, before seeming to come to a decision. After all, she reflected, what were the chances of Rianne actually lasting a whole month?

"OK, it's a deal. Shake on it?"

Rianne grinned and extended her hand. The two girls shook hands, sealing the deal.

"Just one thing, Stormer." said Marlie. "To ensure that there is no cheating." She removed the Tetris cartridge from the Game Boy and put it into its plastic case. "Deanna, can I borrow Nesta?"

"If you want. Why?"

"I want to put temptation out of reach." said Marlie, her evil grin back. "So this cartridge is going straight to my father with instructions not to send it back until the month is up."

"What?" shrieked Rianne, all of a sudden looking a lot less confident.

"What's the matter, Ri? Getting cold feet?" purred Marlie.

"No." said Rianne. No one was fooled, least of all Marlie.

"Never mind." said Marlie, reaching for her quill and dashing off a note to her father, before wrapping note and game in an envelope, addressing and sealing it, ready for Nesta to take away. "I'm sure you'll find something else to occupy your time. At least, I hope you do. Otherwise it's going to be an awfully lonely month, isn't it?" The smile she gave Rianne as she attached the letter to Nesta's leg and sent the bird off, heading towards the owl-tunnels that led to the surface, was just a bit too sweet.

Rianne bit her lip, shaking, furious at Marlie for guessing that she'd been planning to steal it for a bit of illicit cheating on the sly while at the same time wondering just how she was going to last a whole month without Tetris.

"All right. All right." she said, half to herself. "I can do this. Just a month after all. Four weeks. Thirty days. I can do it. I am strong. I have willpower. I can manage."

"I'll get on with arranging the friendly then." said Marlie, grinning. This looked like it was going to be fun.

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That evening brought the traditional Halloween Feast. And in the first year girls' dorm, preparations were well underway, with Lydia expertly fixing Autumn's hair while giving Ginny a running commentary about Hogwarts feast.

"You'll absolutely love the feast, Gin. Apparently they go all out on the decor. Why, Lucas tells me that last year, they had a flock of live bats flitting around the ceiling!"

"I know. Ron told me." said Ginny absently, before wishing she hadn't. Thinking of Ron was still painful.

"Yes I suppose he did." said Lydia thoughtfully. "I keep forgetting you're pure-blood and we don't have to teach you everything. Autumn, stop fidgeting!"

"I can't help it. I'm bored! You're taking too long. Honestly, all you have to do is brush it out and make sure it doesn't look like Medusa's."

"Before or after Athene cursed her?" asked Lydia wryly. "Anyway, I'm done now. Mirror is thataway."

Autumn got up and examined her newly arranged tresses. "Hmm. Not bad. Still feels odd though."

"What, having a feminine hairstyle for once? Tcha. Typical English aristos, no concern for their appearance whatsoever. Come on, Gin. Your turn. You may know all about the feast, but you won't know about the Slytherin Halloween Party that traditionally follows it."

Ginny shook her head, a strange fear suddenly gripping her. "I... I don't know. In fact, I don't think I'll be going to the feast."

Both her friends turned in surprise.

"You what, Gin?" asked Autumn.

"Not go? Gin, it's your first Halloween feast, you can't miss that!" said Lydia in disbelief. "What's wrong, are you ill or something?"

"Yeah." said Ginny, clutching at this avenue of hope. "I'm really not well at all. I don't think I'll be up to a three-course feast." True enough. She was sweating, shaking, feeling more than a little scared and in no way up to eating anything.

"Go to Madam Pomfrey." suggested Autumn, her voice gentle. "She'll sort you out in no time. Then you can come to the feast with us."

"No!" said Ginny. She took in the looks Lydia and Autumn were giving her. "Er... no, I don't think so. I mean, it's not that bad. Not bad enough to trouble her with. I just need a quiet night in, that's all. Just a bit of rest. I'll be fine in the morning, you'll see."

"Well, if you're sure." said Autumn.

"We'll save a seat for you anyway." said Lydia. "So you can come and join us later if you like. And feel free to drop in on the party too."

"Maybe." said Ginny, smiling weakly, trying to keep a calm exterior. It wasn't too hard. Harder to fight was the voice in her mind telling her that she must remain in her dorm, that she mustn't go to the feast, that at all costs she must avoid others tonight.

At length, Lydia and Autumn were ready to go. "Now, are you sure you're not coming, Gin?" Lydia asked.

"No, you two go. I'll be fine." said Ginny. She felt anger rising in her, anger and violence and a deep desire to see them both gone, feelings which alternately thrilled and terrified her.

"All right then, if you insist." sighed Autumn. "We'll bring you back a goody bag. See you later."

"Bye." said Ginny, waiting with bated breath. As soon as the door closed, she let her breath out again. Scrambling through her trunk, it didn't take long to find what she was looking for. A small, black, leather-bound diary.

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"I still can't believe it's Halloween already." said Luella. "Seems like only yesterday we were just getting here."

"Well it is." said Deanna. "And please stop going on about it, that's the third time this evening. Don't make me get a diary out and prove it to you."

"I didn't know you had a diary." remarked Rianne. "You never seemed the type to confide your secrets in anyone."

"I don't. But if I did, I'd be forcing Luella to read it until she got it into her head that it really was Halloween."

"Ginny's got a diary." said Marlie, her mind not really on the conversation. She looked about her. "Where is Ginny anyway?"

They had now reached the Great Hall, and most of the school was present, but of Ginny there was no sign.

"Probably just running late." said Rianne carelessly.

Marlie frowned. "Well, Lydia and Autumn have turned up. You three grab us some seats, I'll go and see what's up with Gin. Catch you later."

The two first years immediately went on their guard at seeing Marlie approach. Rarely did older students go out of their way to acknowledge younger ones so obviously.

"Hello. Is something the matter?" asked Lydia, hoping that Marlie was not about to accuse them of neglecting Ginny.

"No, not really. I was just wondering where Ginny was. Is she OK?"

Marlie's pleasant smile did not soothe their fears one little bit.

"She's in the dorm at the moment. Said she wasn't feeling well." said Autumn. "She's all right though." she added hastily.

"Yeah, we told her to go the hospital wing if she felt any worse." said Lydia. "Reckoned she wasn't too bad though so we left her to it."

"Oh. OK." said Marlie, mildly disappointed that she wasn't going to be able to chat to her favourite young Slytherin. "Send her my regards, won't you? Shame, I was looking forward to seeing her. Oh well. Catch you all later." She wandered off, seeking her friends out.

However, she had not gone far when she found herself tapped on the shoulder. Spinning round, she breathed a sigh of relief on seeing it was only the twins.

"Hi boys!" she smiled. "Happy Halloween. How are you both, I've hardly seen you all term!"

"Yeah, there's a reason for that." said George quietly.

Marlie stopped smiling. She noticed that they were not wearing their usual cheery grins. "All right, you two. What is it."

"We wanted a word with you." said Fred. The stern look on his face really didn't suit him. Marlie couldn't help thinking he looked just like Percy, although she refrained from telling him that.

"What about?" she asked, attempting to use innocence as a shield, although her intuition told her exactly what it was about.

"Ginny." said George. They were both looking like Percy Weasley now.

"Marlie Lovegood, what have you done to her?" said Fred. Amazing. He even sounded like his older brother. Marlie quietly gave thanks that her own brother was as easygoing as he was. Mind you, until now she'd have said the same about the twins...

"I've done nothing to her." said Marlie obstinately. "Would you please explain what you're both on about?"

"You know perfectly well what we're on about, Marlie." said Fred. "Look at her. Before she came here she was a sweet, innocent young thing. Now she's hanging around with Vetinaris and Montagues and Slytherins of all kinds, and she's turning into one of them. We've had to watch her all term, laughing, sharing in the jokes, and generally walking around like she's too good for the rest of us. She's not spoken a word to any of us all term."

"Could that be because you've all been treating her like she's some kind of outcast since her Sorting?" said Marlie, patience wearing thin.

"Yeah, that's because she's turning Slytherin. She's hanging around with them, getting friendly with them, having fun with them!" snapped George.

Marlie blinked, before turning on the sarcasm. "What, a student getting on with their dorm mates? Surely not! How terrible! We can't have *that* can we?"

"That's not what we meant, Marls." said Fred. "It's what she's turning into in the process that bothers us. She's turning into a Slytherin! You are turning her into a Slytherin! Don't tell us you've not been mentoring her!"

Marlie could take no more. "That, Weasley, is because she is a Slytherin! I didn't decide that, the Sorting Hat did! Whether you like it or not, she is Slytherin now, and will be for the next seven years. And if she is going to survive in our house, she'll need to learn properly how to be one of us. Would you rather she spent her entire Hogwarts years being picked on by the rest of her house and not fitting in? I tell you now, I am not bringing out any qualities in her that were not there all along. I'm just looking out for her and teaching her how to make it. Mainly because her Gryffindor "All Slytherins are bastards" older brothers have been acting like she's not related to them all term!"

"Because she's changing, Marls." said Fred, sternness being replaced by a feeling of hurt. "She's changing and we're not at all sure we like what she's becoming."

"And what is she becoming?" Marlie asked, her own anger not soothed one bit.

"A Slytherin." said George, so softly that Marlie barely heard him. Not softly enough.

"A Slytherin." said Marlie. "So boys, let me see. You can handle Slytherins around you, you can handle them as friends. But when your own sister's one, that's somehow different, is it? What's the matter, can't handle it so close to home? Is it a variation on the old 'Some of my best friends are Slytherins but I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one'?"

Neither twin replied, just staring at their feet. Marlie shook her head in disgust.

"Well, if you can't stomach Slytherin qualities in those close to you, maybe you're best off just staying away from us altogether. Gods forbid you get too close to us. Slytherin in-laws are probably the last thing your family wants."

"Wait, Marlie, I didn't mean it like that...!" Fred reached out desperately for Marlie, who was already backing away.

"No, no, you've made yourself perfectly clear, Weasley." She spat the surname at him, making it perfectly clear that first-name terms were now a distant memory. "Gods know I wouldn't want your precious family name tainted by association any more." Turning away and brushing her hair back over her shoulders, she stormed off in a huff, taking a seat next to Deanna and pointedly ignoring the twins.

"What happened there?" asked Deanna.

"Nothing. Fred Weasley's a git, that's all." snapped Marlie. "Now where's this food, I'm starving."

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Fred watched her go before turning to his brother and giving him a sharp smack around the head.

"Ow! What was that for?" said George, rubbing his head.

"Now look what you've done. Marls isn't speaking to us. Nice one, bruv. Honestly, the things I let you talk me into doing."

"You were all for it earlier!" said George, surprised and more than a little annoyed. "You were as hacked off as the rest of us about what Ginny was turning into."

"I'm not bothered about her being Slytherin, I'm just concerned she might be in a bad crowd. You were the one who started the whole 'She's turning Slyth and I don't like it' business."

"Which you were going along with right up until Lovegood made that in-laws remark..." He fell silent, noticing his brother going suddenly red. "Oh bloody hell, Fred, is that what this is all about?"

"No. Well, maybe. Look, all right, yes." said Fred irritably, sitting down at the Gryffindor table. "Honestly, all summer I've been making that much more progress, getting that bit closer, and I was almost, *almost* at the stage where I was ready to ask her out. Not any more. Thanks to you. Why, WHY, when she asked what we thought Ginny was turning into, did you have to say 'A Slytherin'? Did it not occur to you that she'd take it badly?"

"Sorry, Fred. Didn't think." muttered George.

"You don't say. George Weasley, you are a certified, one hundred per cent, bona fide prat."

"Sorry." said George, hanging his head.

"Good. Oh, and next time I'm trying to seduce a girl, just do me a favour and stay out of it, OK?"

"Yes, Fred. Sorry, Fred."

"Thank you. Now pass me the bread rolls, I'm starving." And with that, the Feast was underway.

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The first course and main course passed entirely without event. It wasn't until the dessert was being served that things started to happen.

Deanna glanced up from her chocolate gateau as a sudden movement from Luella caught her attention.

"What's up, Lu?" she asked.

"I don't know." said Luella. "But something's wrong. I can't explain it but something doesn't feel right. And my arm's itching like mad. Has been for the last five minutes." She was rubbing her upper right arm furiously.

"Maybe you're allergic to something?" said Deanna.

Luella shook her head. "Deanna, I've had virtually every dish on the table before now. Never had a reaction yet. I don't know, I just feel really strange. The back of my neck's prickling, it's like something's happening or about to."

Deanna was immediately on guard. "It's not... I mean, you're not... It's not Voldie is it?"

Luella shook her head. "No, this is different. If it is him, he's trying a new tactic. But I don't think it is. It's not an attack, more a warning. Some kind of sign. As if..." She fell silent, a faraway trancelike look coming into her eyes. When she spoke again, it was as if someone else was speaking through her. "As if something is coming to birth. As if some ancient power long buried is coming back to the light." She shook herself and seemed to recover. Now she was no longer in a trance but highly alert, eyes flickering around the room searching for something.

"Lu? Lu, what is it? Are you all right?" Deanna said, deeply concerned. Luella was not acting normally by any definition of the word, and this usually meant trouble. "For gods' sake, Lu, tell me what's going on!"

Luella didn't answer, just getting to her feet. "I have to go." she said calmly. "There's something I've got to do."

"Like what? Lu!" Deanna caught hold of Luella's sleeve, desperate for some kind of explanation. "Where are you going?"

Luella shook herself free. "You don't need to know. This is my affair, Deanna." And with that she was gone, still scratching her arm idly, leaving Deanna bewildered and terrified for her friend.

"What was that all about?" asked Rianne, who'd been watching from across the table.

"I don't know," replied Deanna. "but I have a very bad feeling about this."

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Luella hurried out of the Great Hall, up the stairs, drawn by an unknown force from within that was calling her, calling her onwards. This is your destiny, your fate, your power, come to me, come to me Redeemer child, come to me, she could almost hear it whispering.

"Yes." she whispered. "Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming."

She raced up to the first floor and turned into the main corridor when it happened. The itching on her arm, which had been getting steadily worse suddenly exploded into a burning sensation, as if someone had taken red-hot coals and was pressing them onto her arm. Luella screamed and sank to her knees, clutching it, trying to numb the pain. The summons had stopped, driven away and stopped in its tracks by the agony, centred on her arm but so intense that she couldn't concentrate on anything else. There was nothing else.

Sobbing, she leaned against the walls, eyes shut tight, desperately trying to stop the pain. Which, fortunately for her, is why she remained unaware of the scene up ahead, unaware of a giant shape rearing up above a small four-legged figure, unaware of something that sounded like a cat's scream, the dark shape retreating, and a small figure that had been busily engaged in writing something on the wall tying something to a torch before turning and running.

Finally, the pain ceased. Her arm felt normal again, well, more or less. It was still tingling a bit. Luella dragged herself to her feet and walked uncertainly along the corridor. This was where she'd been called to, she was sure. But why?

An answer of sorts was soon provided. Just opposite the girls' toilets, in between two flaming torches. Luella could see a dark shape hanging from one of the torch brackets. Picking up her robes to stop the hem dragging in the water that was flooding this part of the corridor, she approached it, a sense of foreboding gripping her.

Luella leapt back in fright. It was Mrs. Norris, Filch the caretaker's cat. She was frozen, stiff, eyes wide yet sightless, resembling nothing so much as a cartoon cat that had been flattened by some huge weight. It would have been funny if the situation hadn't been so threatening. That, however, was not what had scared her.

In between the torches, painted on the wall in big red letters, were two terrifying sentences, one of which meant nothing to her, the other of which was all too horrifyingly familiar:

*THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR,
BEWARE.*

Luella backed away in haste. She didn't know what it meant, or what it could possibly refer to (although she could come up with a few educated guesses, none of which were particularly pleasant), but she did know one thing. It was definitely not a good idea to stick around.

She was about to turn and run when she heard footsteps, and a voice saying "Harry, *what* was all that about? I couldn't hear anything..." then trailing off. Luella turned round.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were watching her in silence. Then Harry's eyes travelled across the lettering on the wall.

"Enemies of the Heir... Lu, what happened here?"

"I don't know!" said Luella in terror. "I just got here, and it was like this! I don't know who did it!"

Harry tried to soothe the frightened Slytherin as best as he could. Ron, however, was giving Luella a very dubious look indeed, which did nothing to quiet her fears.

Hermione, meanwhile, was examining Mrs. Norris. "What on earth happened to her?" she whispered. "Is she alive?"

"I don't know. It doesn't look like it." said Luella.

Ron's doubtful look changed to one of admiration. "You killed Mrs. Norris? Cool! Can you do Filch too?"

"I did not kill her!" Luella nearly screamed at him. "I just found her like this!"

"Course you did, Martin." said Ron, grinning, before turning to Harry. "We'd better get moving."

"Shouldn't we stay, try to help Mrs. Norris?" Harry said uncertainly.

"No." said Ron firmly. "Trust me, this is not a good place for us to be. You coming, Mione?"

Hermione nodded, splashing her way back over to them. The four children began heading swiftly for the stairs.

However, it was too late. A thunderous noise from downstairs indicated that the feast had ended and even now, students were swarming upstairs and pouring into the corridor. They were trapped.

The crowd of students came to a halt as they saw the words, the chatter dying away as they absorbed the scene before them. Luella caught sight of Deanna, Marlie and Rianne reading the lettering, then their eyes falling on her in horror.

The crowd parted as a small blond figure pushed his way forward, eyes shining, face flushed. Malfoy.

"Enemies of the Heir, beware!" he laughed. "You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

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What followed next passed in a blur. Dumbledore had arrived, removed the prone cat and instructed the four of them to follow him. They'd gone to Lockhart's office, followed by Lockhart himself, Filch, McGonagall and Snape.

Hermione watched as Dumbledore and McGonagall inspected the cat carefully. It really was a marvel how they could concentrate, she thought. Filch was sobbing uncontrollably, lamenting the fate of his beloved Mrs. Norris, while Lockhart was dancing around offering all sorts of suggestions. Then there was Luella to think about.

The Slytherin's normal friendly composure was gone, gone completely. She was sitting in a chair next to Hermione, staring into space, huddled up, rocking back and forth with a terrified look on her face, shaking and trembling, and for some strange reason, frantically rubbing her right arm. Hermione tried to comfort her, but Luella didn't respond. Hermione frowned. This didn't look good. While she didn't believe for a moment that Luella was responsible, there was no getting away from the fact that she looked scared out of her wits. What did she know that they didn't? The phrase 'Enemies of the Heir, Beware' sounded familiar and Malfoy clearly had heard it before. Maybe Luella did too. Was it some kind of Slytherin thing? Hermione looked surreptitiously at Snape. His attention was focused on Luella. That was no surprise - she was a favourite student of his after all. What was astonishing was the look he was giving her, a look of cold fury. And the way Luella was staring so fixedly into space, almost as if she couldn't bear to look at him. No doubt about it, something very strange was going on here. She recalled last year, when they'd thought Snape was psychically attacking Luella. They'd been wrong that time, but now...

She put the thought out of her mind. Stop it at once. Snape is a teacher, he is not using Dark Arts on his students. He's probably just angry that one of his students is involved in something like this, she thought. Which, come to think of it, explained a lot. Especially why Luella was so frightened. She didn't blame her, having to give some kind of account to Snape later. Mind you, she'd coped all right last Halloween...

At length, Dumbledore straightened up. "She's not dead, Argus."

Filch straightened up immediately, stunned. "Not dead? But what is wrong with her then?"

"She's Petrified. But how or why, I cannot say."

"Ask them!" spat Filch, pointing at the terrified students. "I bet they know! That Potter, he's got it in for me!"

"No student did this." said Dumbledore, his voice gentle but firm. "Not even one as gifted as Miss Martin here." Luella relaxed a little at this, but did not look up. "This is Dark Magic of the highest order, I do not believe any of them are capable of Petrification."

Filch opened his mouth to reply but he was cut off by Snape getting to his feet.

"I see, Headmaster. Well, in that case, having established that for once, these four have not been causing trouble again, may I see Miss Martin back to her common room? There is little else to be accomplished here, as far as I can see."

Dumbledore assented, and Snape made to grab Luella's arm. The girl immediately flinched away from him. Snape backed off and merely indicated for her to follow him out. Luella got up, head bowed and left. Hermione thought back to exactly a year ago, when Snape had also hauled Luella out of a rather compromising situation. Then, Luella had seemed fairly confident of escaping. How things had changed. Luella looked the opposite of confident now. Now, she looked like she was going to her execution.

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Hermione followed Harry and Ron out, preoccupied. The boys were discussing the evening's events.

"The whole thing's weird. What was that writing on the wall about? The Chamber has been opened. What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron looked thoughtful. "You know, I've heard something about that before. I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts before. Might have been Bill..."

"I hope Luella's all right." said Hermione, voicing her own concerns. "She looked terrified."

Ron's expression changed to one of suspicion. "Terrified, you reckon. I think she looked guilty, myself."

"Guilty?" gasped Hermione. She shook her head. "Don't be silly, Ron, it wasn't her, it couldn't have been. Could it? Harry?"

Harry looked worried. "I don't know. It did look dodgy, finding her there on her own. I mean, what was she doing there? Shouldn't she have been at the Feast?"

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't her, Harry! Lu is not like that, she's a nice girl. She does not go around Petrifying cats and writing spooky messages on walls. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

"Course she was." muttered Ron. "She's a Slytherin after all, they're the last people to fake charm and sincerity as a way of hiding their sneakiness, aren't they?"

"Ron!" snapped Hermione. She straightened up, indignant. "Luella is not sneaky. And she did not Petrify Mrs. Norris and put the writing up there. She wouldn't. It's not her thing."

"If you say so, Mione." shrugged Ron, clearly not convinced. "If you say so."

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Snape did not say a word to Luella as he led her through the school towards the dungeons. Not until they arrived at his classroom did he hold the door open for her and tell her briefly to get in. Luella did as she was asked, trembling. She'd never felt as afraid of him as she did tonight. She'd never seen him so furious. Not even in her first year. At least then she'd had Marlie and Deanna alongside her for a bit of support. Now she was completely alone and facing the Wrath of Snape.

He closed the door and turned to face her. She did not meet his eyes.

"Well?" was all he said.

"It wasn't me." she said quickly, praying that her nerve wouldn't give out. "Sir, I promise you, I swear it, I don't know who put the writing there or did that to Mrs. Norris. I just turned up and found it like that."

"Just turned up and found it." said Snape, the sarcasm already starting. "Just happened to be in the area, did you?"

"Yes!" said Luella. "Please, sir, you have to believe me, I had nothing to do with it!"

Snape just sneered at her. "Believe you. Really. Miss Martin, I hope you'll forgive me if I take your word for what it's worth. Not much, I think." He stepped forward and closed the gap between them, his twisted features inches from hers. Luella, trapped between her House Master and a desk, could only lean away in terror. "The conversation we had the second night of term was meant to be a secret known to the two of us only. So pray, tell me, why did I receive a visit from the Head of the DDAE the following week concerning that very conversation? She certainly seemed to know all about what we discussed. What did you say to her?!" Sarcasm shifted not-so-subtly into blind rage. Luella shrank back in fear.

"I didn't say anything to her, I promise!" she said, panicking. She tried to think. How could Melissa Lovegood possibly have known? Then it hit her. Lovegood...

"I'll bloody kill her." Luella said, half to herself. Fear melted into anger in a second. "I am going to bloody murder the woman! What I said to her was in strictest confidence, how dare she go running to her mother! Damn her, damn her, damn her!" She pounded her hand with her fist.

Snape's habitual sneer had returned. "So you poured your heart out to Marlene Lovegood." A hint of disbelief crept in. "Why?"

"She was there. And I could hardly turn to my best friend, could I? You saw to that, didn't you?" Luella's fear was completely gone by now. Interesting how anger could have that effect on her. She couldn't help thinking that Professor Snape was probably regretting teaching her that particular lesson. Or at least, he soon would be... "I really don't believe you, you know? You overstep the mark completely, go far, far beyond a simple teacher-student relationship, use me as some kind of shoulder to cry on and drag me into something no fourteen year old should have to deal with, and then you have the *nerve* to blame *me* when I need someone to talk to in turn! Did you know how I felt? Did you realise? Did you even care? You're lucky it was only Marlie. You're bloody lucky it wasn't Dumbledore." She was meeting his eyes now. Or at least she would have been if he hadn't been avoiding looking at her, looking rather embarrassed.

"All right. You've made your point." he said, the anger gone. In fact, although she couldn't swear to it, he even looked a little bit guilty. Luella felt her confidence return. It was probably the nearest she was going to get to an apology, much less an admission she was right.

"Thank you." she said, nothing if not gracious. Snape seemed to understand her, sinking into his usual chair and now acting as if nothing had happened.

"So. Tell me. What happened tonight. Why did you leave the feast, you were there for the first two courses." He was regarding her curiously. Luella took a seat opposite.

"I'm not sure." she said, trying to remember what had happened that night. "It was really weird. I was fine up until dessert, then I just got this really strange feeling. As if something was happening, or about to. I felt like someone was calling me, like there was somewhere I had to be, something I had to do. As if..." she hesitated, the memory returning, a memory of power, vitality and a deep, profound awareness. "As if it was my destiny."

She noticed Snape sitting up, sizing her up intensely. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, beware." he said, as if to himself. "The Heir of Slytherin... Go on. What happened, where did you go after you left the Great Hall?"

"I don't really remember." said Luella slowly. "I think I went to the first floor corridor, you know, where the writing appeared. But it wasn't me who put it there. You have to believe me." Panic began to resurface.

"I believe you." said Snape calmly. "Many wouldn't. Did you see anyone else there?"

Luella shook her head. "No. But that doesn't mean there wasn't anyone there. As I entered the corridor, I felt this awful pain in my arm. Couldn't see or do anything, it was that bad."

"In your arm?" Snape's whole attitude had changed to one of horror. "A burning pain? Like you were being branded?"

"Yeah." said Luella. "Sir, what is it? What's wrong?" He looked far more shocked than anyone had a right to be and this was doing nothing for Luella's nerves.

"Show me your left arm. And roll your sleeve back." he said. Luella did so, wondering what on earth was wrong with him. He examined her forearm closely, before letting her go, breathing a sigh of relief. Luella rolled her sleeve down.

"What was that for?" she asked, confused.

"Nothing." said Snape, actually smiling now. "Just a precautionary measure. All right, Miss Martin. You may go. Get some rest. It's gone midnight, I think we all need sleep. Especially you, child, you look worn out."

Luella was about to protest, but found herself yawning instead. "OK then. Goodnight, sir." She got up and turned to leave.

"Goodnight." she heard him saying. "Oh, and Luella."

"Yes sir?" she asked, stopping in her tracks.

"You were in the right. I'm sorry I shouted at you earlier."

"That's quite all right, sir." she said, rather embarrassed. "I'll, erm, be going then. See you in the morning." She left as quickly as she could. However, later she began to wonder if perhaps it might not have been a bad idea to tell him precisely which arm had been hurting...

Snape waited until she was gone before swiftly rolling up his left sleeve and checking his own forearm. Nothing there. He breathed a sigh of relief. One less thing to worry about. However, that didn't stop him spending the next hour staring broodily into space, pondering everything he'd seen and heard that night.

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Chapter Eight Secrets, Lies and Schadenfreude

There was only one topic of conversation in the Slytherin common room that night. If you could call it conversation. Most Slytherins were too shocked to say anything. Those that weren't, however, couldn't stop discussing it.

A smallish group of younger Slytherins had gathered next to the fire, seeking a little mutual reassurance not found when it was just one's dorm mates around you. Either that or they were seeking safety in numbers. Deanna suspected the latter. She looked around at the little gathering. No one there over fifteen. Nice to see their beloved leaders were sticking around to give support in a crisis. Just Lydia and Autumn sitting together, huddled up and scared, Autumn openly so, Lydia putting a brave face on it. Deanna couldn't help but think of herself at the same age. She suppressed a smile. Now was probably not the time to laugh.

Pansy was there, sitting on her own, curled up on a Care Bears bean bag that Marlie had dredged up from somewhere. Normally no one touched it unless it was the last seat available. In fact, "getting the Care Bears beanbag" was now a Slytherin synonym for drawing the short straw in any given situation. Things were obviously pretty desperate when someone like Pansy was voluntarily using it. My god, even she's admitting she needs support, thought Deanna. That no doubt also explained why she was giving Draco this rather pathetic little girl look.

Malfoy. Now there was a mystery. Slytherin's Mr. Cool (well, Mr. Cool wannabe anyhow) pacing around like a kid on Christmas Eve. Was everyone regressing to age five? Deanna checked to see that she wasn't displaying any obvious signs of childhood. To her great relief, she wasn't. Sitting quite normally in an inflatable Homer Simpson chair. Tasteless (why did someone so impeccably turned out as Marlie always have such lousy decorative tastes? One of life's eternal mysteries) but at least it wasn't Care Bears.

Marlie was on Deanna's right, managing to grab the seat by the fire as usual. Even in a nuclear winter, you could probably count on Marlie to find the one shelter where the roaches hadn't made it. One of life's fortunate ones, Marlie. Typical Sagittarian, things always went right for them. Trust her to walk away from even a Sleeping Death trance without so much as a neurosis to call her own. Although this time, even the Slytherin Supernova looked worried. In fact, Deanna was forcibly reminded of how Marlie had looked when she'd first met her - small, shy and desperately insecure. She just hoped that was as far as the resemblance went - Marlie's bravery, confidence and sense of ethics were mostly hard-won trophies from her trance of three years ago. Deanna really didn't want to have to hang around with her if those went by the wayside.

On her other side, Rianne was perched on a black beanbag, folded into the lotus position, looking like a queen. She was one of the few who didn't look frightened. Well, she was the oldest present. Maybe she felt it was her moral duty to be strong for everyone else. Whatever, she was having a genuine calming effect on everyone. The two first years in particular were silently begging her to explain it all, make it go away. Whether Rianne would be able to follow through or not was another story.

And if Rianne was the queen, Lucas Vetinari was the undisputed king. Seated in between Rianne and his sister, he somehow managed to look dignified even in a blue inflatable chair. Dominating the gathering without even saying a word, you just knew that things would be OK, which probably explained why his little sister was actually acknowledging his existence for once. Remember me when you're Minister of Magic, Deanna grinned to herself.

"What happened to her?" asked Lydia in a daze, her eyes seeking some kind of meaning, any kind of meaning from the brother she adored, deep down. "I mean, why would anyone want to kill Mrs. Norris?"

"Maybe they met her?" suggested Rianne.

"What gets me is that it's always the same four students who get involved in things like this." remarked Lucas. "Something bizarre happens, and you can bet your entire family fortune that Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and Luella Martin will be involved somehow. It can be a new addition to the list of Hogwarts Traditions. Sorting Ceremony, Choosing of Prefects and Head Students, Welcome Feast, Halloween Feast, Potter, Granger, Weasley and Martin Getting Found in a Compromising Situation."

Most of the Slytherins sniggered at this.

"Compromising position, eh?" Pansy's little girl demeanour shifted to reveal the tough cookie beneath. "Kinky!"

"Leave them alone." said Deanna, feeling the need to come to Luella's rescue. "It's not their fault that trouble seems to have a way of following them around. Not Harry's fault that he's on Lord Voldie's hit list." Or Lu's fault that she's destined to kill him, she added mentally.

"Well, be that as it may, I'd like to see how they're going to worm their way out of this one. Killing the caretaker's cat, now that's a new one. Did you see Filch's face?" Lucas grinned, but he was just about the only one.

"It's the writing that got me." said Autumn. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Creepy! Does anyone know what it means?" The first year looked quite unnerved. Sitting almost opposite her, Marlie began to feel rather sorry for the kid. She kept forgetting that not everyone was as used to weird and disturbing goings on as she was. Damn you, Lu, she thought. OK, you can't help being what you are, but can't you spare a thought for everyone else around you and at least try to be normal sometimes?

"Well, Enemies of the Heir Beware is a Slytherin war chant." said Pansy. "Don't know what it's got to do with anything though." I mean, who declares war by killing a cat? she thought. You'd have to be really sick to come up with an idea like that. Not Lu Martin's style at all. Then again, her parents did always say that it was the quiet ones you had to watch.

"What *does* an old war chant have to do with a secret chamber and killing Mrs. Norris anyway?" mused Rianne to herself. "Anyone know what it means?"

"The Chamber of Secrets." said Deanna. "I'm sure I've heard of it, you know. Sure I've read it somewhere. If only I could remember where..."

"Shame on you, Tyler." flung in Draco. He'd been fired up ever since seeing Mrs. Norris hanging there, full of energy and life, a complete contrast to his normal languid manner. Marlie couldn't help but wonder whether he was always like this in a crisis. It could make a good Barometer of Weirdness - when Draco Malfoy was actually showing signs of possessing energy, things were getting bad.

"Fancy not knowing your own House's history. Well, that'll change. Soon everyone will. Oh yes. They will." He was pacing the floor, face flushed, eyes dancing, his entire demeanour that of a fanatic, on fire for whatever unholy cause he seemed to have espoused.

Deanna concealed her disquiet. "All very well and good, but rather than prancing around the room like someone's given you a cocaine enema, how about you start now and enlighten the rest of us? Come on. You're clearly dying to tell us exactly what the Chamber of Secrets is and how it relates to Enemies of the Heir, so you might as well get on with it. Hell, it's probably the only time you'll have so many people giving you so much attention without Crabbe and Goyle putting wands to their heads."

Draco ignored the insult, settling down in a chair between Pansy and Autumn, a real one as opposed to one of Marlie's introductions, the firelight illuminating his face as he seemed to change from the Malfoy they all knew into some kind of ancient tribal storyteller. "Gather round then, Slyths. Hear your history, those of you who don't already know it.

"It all began not long after the Founding. As it does today, Hogwarts admitted all children with magical skills, whether their parents were mages or Muggles. And as is the case today, not all were united on whether it was a good idea or not. Not even the Founders. Godric Gryffindor, Muggle-loving fool that he was, was all for letting everyone in. Salazar Slytherin, on the other hand, our proud and noble House Founder, preferred to keep these things in the family, so to speak."

"So they had a fight over it and Salazar lost, and Slytherin House has been tainted ever since." Rianne finished for him. "Malfoy, there's not many of us who don't know that. Get to the interesting bit. This Chamber of Secrets."

"All right, all right, I'm getting there! Let me finish, won't you!" Draco rubbed his forehead, trying to get his train of thought back on track. "Anyway, yes, Salazar Slytherin gets defeated and kicked out. But before he left, he created a hidden chamber, the Chamber of Secrets, somewhere in Hogwarts. And in it, he placed a monster, sealed up and asleep deep within the bowels of the school. Waiting." He paused for dramatic effect.

"Waiting for what?" asked Autumn.

"Waiting for the return of the Heir of Slytherin." said Draco in a voice that sounded almost like a hiss, flinging his head back in triumph. "The Heir of Slytherin, who will

open the Chamber, unleash the horror within and cleanse this school of all who are... unworthy." While he didn't say it, everyone guessed what he meant by unworthy.

Deanna glanced at Rianne, who nodded at her as if to say "Go on." Emboldened, she turned to Malfoy.

"Sounds like a twisted version of the Redemption Prophecy. Everyone knows that there'll be two Heirs and they'll both be of Muggle extraction. Which kind of leaves your pet theory dead in the water, doesn't it?"

Draco glared at her. "What, and you think they'll be benign New Age hippies who'll bring peace and light? Use your eyes, Tyler, the scourge is starting already. It's begun with the familiar of that worthless Squib Filch. Next it'll be the Mudbloods. The time is right. A thousand years since the fall of Slytherin. And fifty years since the last Heir walked amongst us. The Chamber was opened then too, and that time, a Mudblood died. Of course, they stopped the first Heir. Who knows," he leered at them, rubbing his hands in anticipation, "maybe the second will finish the job."

Deanna gripped the arms of her chair, knuckles white as her fingers dug into the vinyl, only just reining in her anger. "She will not!" she raged at him. "She's the Redeemer, she wouldn't!"

Rianne grabbed Deanna's sleeve. "Tyler, quiet!" she whispered. "Don't say anything you shouldn't."

Deanna backed off, glaring at Draco, exuding smugness. However, it wasn't Rianne who stopped the argument from continuing. It was the sound of the door opening.

Luella stepped in, looking distinctly worried. She halted in her tracks as the entire room fell silent and turned to look at her.

"What?" she demanded. "What's up with you lot?"

"How's Mrs. Norris?" asked Draco, that maniacal grin fixed as firmly in place as the cat in question.

"Alive." Luella told them. "Alive, but Petrified. I think Dumbledore's working on a cure."

"What, couldn't you finish the job properly?" Draco's grin finally shifted, but the pout that replaced it wasn't really much of an improvement. "The power of Slytherin behind you and you can't even kill a cat?"

"It wasn't me!" shouted Luella. "I just found her like that!"

"Of course you did, Martin." Draco's voice oozed with syrup, a sweetness that really didn't suit him. "Which is why you looked so guilty when we all found you there with the Three Not-So-Wise Gryffindors. Why were you there anyway?"

Luella hesitated. Don't tell them, Deanna mutely implored her. Make something up, anything. She was not disappointed.

"I didn't feel well, that's all." Why, wasn't it obvious? her body language seemed to say. "I was on my way up to the hospital wing when I found her. Now I'm still not feeling brilliant so I'm going to bed. Goodbye." And with that she stormed off towards the dorm. Deanna gave a private prayer of thanks to any passing deity. However, she couldn't help thinking that Luella of all people should have been able to charm her way out of things rather more adroitly. Typical Lu, really, never thinking to use her powers when they actually would have come in useful.

The Slytherins watched her go in silence. Pansy was first to speak, hands on her hips in indignation.

"She was a mine of information, wasn't she? Is it me or did she look a bit guilty there?"

"She did not look guilty." snapped Deanna. "She was just tired and unwell, and wanted to go to bed. I'm telling you, she didn't do anything to Mrs. Norris! She wouldn't. Lu wouldn't hurt anyone. It's not in her nature. It's not!" But then again, nor was leaving the feast in the way she had... Deanna brushed the thought from her mind and got up, ignoring the disbelieving sneers she was getting from some of her housemates. "I am going to bed. Goodnight, all of you. Coming along, you two?"

Rianne nodded, and hauling a rather nervous-looking Marlie after her, followed Deanna to the dorm.

The gathering broke up after that. Pansy and Draco did not stay long, which just left the two first years and Lucas. Lydia turned to her brother, seeking some answers.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true, sis?" asked Lucas, the long habit of winding up his little sister being a tough one to break. Lydia fought back the urge to slap him.

"Those legends that Malfoy was talking about. There's not really an Heir of Slytherin out to kill all the Muggle-borns, is there?"

"Of course not." said Lucas, surprised than anyone could think otherwise. "Come on, you know Dad reckons all these old Slytherin legends are just a way for Slytherins who didn't make it to justify their failure by blaming it all on someone else. You don't want to pay too much attention to Malfoy either - Dad tells me they're a twisted bunch and always have been. Did Draco look like a sane and normal human being tonight? No. Did he look like one of those idiot Muggles who likes to stockpile weaponry and hide out in the mountains where the government can't find him? Yes. Don't get upset by it, kid. It's just some random nutter with a basic knowledge of Slytherin history and a grudge against Filch wanting to freak us all out. Admittedly, that doesn't really narrow it down a lot, but still, it's a lot more plausible than the idea of the second Heir walking among us wanting to wipe out the Muggle-borns."

"You don't think Lu Martin might be the second Heir, do you?" Autumn whispered.

Lucas burst out laughing. "Her? Never. Far too normal. She's Muggle-born herself anyway, why would she do that? Look, you two stop worrying. Everything'll just blow over, you'll see. You're Slytherins, you're pure-bloods, you're safe. Nothing for you two to worry about. See you both tomorrow." He gave Lydia a reassuring pat on the shoulder and walked out.

Autumn turned to her friend. "Do you believe him?"

"I don't know." Lydia sat huddled up, watching the firelight. "But this I do know - when it comes to seeing a Petrified cat and Draco Malfoy in that weird mood he was in, there's no doubt over who wins in the disturbing stakes. It's Malfoy all the way. Dad's right, the Malfoys are all insane. He was talking about killing Muggle-borns! And enjoying it!"

"Lydia, you're always making patronising comments about Muggle-borns being clueless. According to you, they're slightly less of a target for mockery than Hufflepuffs."

Lydia squirmed in her seat. "That's different."

"How, exactly?" inquired Autumn.

"I might laugh at their cluelessness. I might make fun of them for not knowing all the things you and I take for granted. But I wouldn't want them dead. Malfoy was talking about them like they were subhuman! I don't like him. You know what, I can see why Tyler and Lovegood hate him." She got up to leave. "Come on, let's go to bed, update Ginny on the night's adventures."

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Deanna found Luella standing in front of the dorm mirror, sleeve rolled up to her shoulder, examining her right arm. She dropped the sleeve as soon as she heard the door open, swiftly spinning round. She relaxed on seeing it was only Deanna, but not much.

"Hey, Lu." said Deanna, smiling, trying not to think of how Luella had been acting that evening. "You OK?"

"Yeah, not bad. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." She smiled in return, but Deanna couldn't help thinking that Luella's smile was about as skin-deep as her own.

"Deanna, you don't think it was me, do you?" asked Luella. "Because it wasn't. I swear it!"

"Of course not." said Deanna. "You wouldn't do anything like that. Not even to Mrs. Norris. Ignore Malfoy, he's a little stirrer."

Luella nodded. "Thanks." Her expression turned to a less pleasant one as Rianne and Marlie followed Deanna in. Walking purposefully over to Marlie, she grabbed her by the front of her robes. "Marlie, which part of the phrase 'Don't tell anyone' don't you understand? Catch me using you as a confidant again! Thanks to your inability to keep a secret, I just had a major tongue-lashing from Snape and it was not pleasant!"

"Lu, I'm sorry!" gasped Marlie. "Let me go, please! Lu, you're hurting me!" She wriggled in Luella's grip.

"Lu, what the hell are you doing?" asked Deanna, stunned. She tugged at Luella's arm, in an attempt to dislodge her. Luella ignored her.

"Not nearly as much as you deserve." Luella snarled, releasing Marlie, who staggered backwards, almost falling over until Rianne steadied her. "I suppose you'd go running to your mother then too, wouldn't you?"

"Lu, I'm sorry, I was just trying to help..." faltered Marlie. Luella cut her short.

"Next time, don't. In fact, do me a big favour and stay the hell out of my life entirely." She turned on her heel and walked over to her bed, drawing the curtains behind her in one angry motion.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked Rianne, bewildered.

Marlie shook her head, small and fragile. "Doesn't matter." she said in a tiny, quiet voice, suddenly looking three years younger, as if she'd regressed to her pre-Sleeping Death days. "Just that Lu told me something I was meant to keep quiet, and I told my mother about it. Not important."

"Not important?" said Deanna. "Best friend or no best friend, she was right out of order. I'm going to have a word with her." She turned and headed for Luella's bed. Rianne turned to Marlie.

"Are you really OK, Marls? Because you don't look it."

Marlie didn't reply. She was watching Deanna slide onto Luella's bed, pulling the curtains shut behind her. From behind the curtains came some muffled noises which sounded suspiciously like someone hissing furiously.

"Do you believe it?" she said quietly. "What Malfoy said. About the Heir of Slytherin coming to get rid of anyone with Muggle blood in them."

"I believe the legend may be true. But I don't think that Luella is responsible for what happened tonight." Rianne guided Marlie away from where Deanna and Luella appeared to be reaching some kind of agreement and towards her bed. "Go on, get to bed. Get some sleep. I think we all need it."

Marlie nodded wearily as she crawled into bed. All the same, she couldn't stop thinking about how bizarrely Luella had been acting that night. Granted, it wasn't in

character for her to start exterminating fellow students. But it also wasn't in character for her to physically intimidate her friends...

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Deanna parted the curtains and crawled inside, lighting her wand as she did so. Luella was sitting hunched up, her chin on her knees. She did not look pleased to see Deanna.

"What."

"I want to know what's up." said Deanna, arms and legs folded, looking eerily like Caitlin in the half-light. "I want to know what's going on with you and Marlie. I want to know what's up with your arm. I want to know why you left the feast in such a hurry. Lu, what the hell is going on?"

"Not that easy, Dee." said Luella, a bittersweet smile on her face. "I can't tell you what the row with Marlie's about. Let's just say I told her something that was meant to be between the two of us. As for tonight..." she gestured helplessly. "I don't know! I don't know what's going on. All I know is that there was something calling me tonight. Something summoning me and I couldn't resist it. And I think it was linked with the attack on Mrs. Norris. But I didn't do it." she added, determined to get that one settled straight away. "I didn't! I mean, I know the phrase 'Enemies of the Heir, Beware' is the war chant associated with the Redeemer Prophecy, but I didn't put the words there. I don't even know what the Chamber of Secrets is!"

"It was built by Salazar Slytherin before he left Hogwarts." Deanna informed her. "It's got a monster of some kind in there. The legend goes that it can only be opened by a true Heir of Slytherin, who will then use the power within to cleanse the school of all who are unworthy to study here. It's been opened once before, fifty years ago, when the other Heir of Slytherin was here. Fifty years ago, Lu."

Luella was not slow in grasping the meaning. "Voldemort. Oh my god. He could open the chamber. He did open it. And if he can..."

"Then you probably can too." said Deanna. "Which is why I'm asking, did you?"

Luella shook her head, tears beginning to well up. "No." she whispered. "No, I didn't, I swear. Please, you've got to believe me."

Deanna looked at her, dubious. On the one hand, Luella wouldn't purposely lie to her, surely. But on the other, she was an Heir of Slytherin.

"All right. I believe you. Just one thing. This secret you entrusted Marlie with. Does it have anything to do with ancient Slytherin prophecies, hidden chambers or the systematic eradication of students of Muggle origin?"

Deanna felt her doubts melt away before the smile Luella was giving her, an unforced, glamour-free, true smile. "No. No, it had nothing to do with any of that."

"Good. Well in that case, I'll let you get to sleep. See you in the morning. Don't let them get to you. I'm certain it wasn't you. Night, Lu."

"Night, Deanna." Luella murmured as Deanna crawled back out. She began to strip off her robes and get changed into her pyjamas. However, before crawling into bed, she couldn't resist having one last look at her right arm and the serpentine emblem now emblazoned on her skin.

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Ginny came to with a start. What had happened? Last thing she remembered was reaching for her diary with a splitting headache. Maybe she'd fallen asleep or something. But that didn't explain why she was now standing in the middle of the dorm, clutching the diary in her hand.

It also didn't explain why her hands, sleeves and the front of her robes were covered in red paint.

Paint? How on earth had she managed to get paint all over her? She didn't know, but something told her it wasn't a good idea for her dorm mates to see her like this. Concealing the diary under her pillow, she hastily stripped her robes off and pulled her nightdress and dressing gown on. Next, a Cleaning Charm to sort her hands out. That done, she began stuffing her robes into the laundry basket, infinitely grateful that unlike her mother, house-elves wouldn't ask any awkward questions about how they got that way.

The door opened just as she was closing the laundry basket. Spinning round, she tried not to look guilty as Lydia and Autumn walked in.

"Hi, you two. How was the feast?" That's right, Gin, keep it innocent, keep the conversation normal.

"Hey, Gin. You're up." Lydia pulled up a stool while Autumn perched at the end of her bed. "Join us." She indicated another stool. "Because you're not going to believe what happened tonight!"

Ginny listened in horror as Lydia recounted the night's events.

"Red?" she asked as Lydia described how they'd found the writing on the wall. "You're sure it was in red?"

"Yes, of course I am." Lydia was not pleased to have her story interrupted over such a trivial detail. "I'm quite capable of telling one colour from another, even in torchlight."

Ginny delicately pulled her dressing gown sleeves over her hands, which still had a reddish tinge to them even now.

"OK, so you found Lu Martin and the three Gryffindors in front of Mrs. Norris and this writing. What happened next?"

She listened as her friend went on to describe the conversation in the common room, and how Malfoy had explained the Chamber of Secrets legend to them.

"They reckon that next time it'll be a student." Lydia tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Last time round one of the Muggle-borns was killed."

"Killed?" Ginny fought to keep her composure. "Oh my... What's going to happen to us? What's going to happen?"

"Gin, calm down!" Lydia tried to reassure her. "We're all pure-bloods. We're safe at least."

"That's not the point!" said Ginny, fighting the hysteria threatening to get out.

"I think, Lydia, that she doesn't want to see large numbers of Muggle-borns get killed." Autumn intervened. "Think about it, that's half the school! Most of us have got some Muggle ancestry somewhere along the lines."

"It won't come to that." Lydia tried to summon up the legendary Vetinari self-assurance. "Lucas reckons the Malfoys are all nuts, and looking at Draco, I can believe it. Malfoy's just trying to scare us all. Probably just some nutter with a grudge. Yeah, that'll be it."

Autumn did not share her friend's bravado. "He didn't sound like he was joking, Lydia. And he said Lu Martin did it."

"She didn't!" gasped Ginny. Not Luella, surely? "But she's Muggle-born, why would she?"

"Exactly. Honestly, just because her and Potter were the first on the scene, everyone seems to think she's the Heir of Slytherin. I mean, look at her. Does she look like an Heir to you? Of course not. And Gin, you stop worrying. We're not going to have all the Muggle-borns dying on us. Go on, get to bed. It's late, we need sleep. You wait, this time tomorrow we'll all be wondering what on earth all the fuss was about."

Goodnights were exchanged and the other two girls turned in, leaving Ginny on her own, staring at the flakes of red paint under her fingernails.

"It's not me. It can't be." whispered Ginny. But if it wasn't her, why couldn't she remember where she'd been this evening? She needed to think. Needed to get her thoughts in order. Needed to talk to someone impartial, someone who she knew wouldn't tell anyone else. Scrabbling around for a quill, she reached for her diary.

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Nothing was said to Luella's face after that night - the Slytherin fourth years wielded enough collective power to ensure that no one mentioned the subject again. Behind their backs, on the other hand, was a different matter.

It was the Wednesday evening after the Halloween feast, and the Slytherin reserves were in action against their Ravenclaw counterparts. Quite a few Slytherins had turned out to watch, not least because they wanted to see what Marlie was going to do with the team.

Lydia, Autumn and Ginny were watching from the front row.

"They're good, aren't they?" enthused Lydia.

"They are." Autumn, heavily influenced by her older sister, had already decided she was going to play Quidditch for her house one day or die trying. "Especially Tyler - that's the fourth goal she's scored, and the game's only been going on for half an hour. Her and your brother - they're good! They're going to thrash Ravenclaw at this rate."

"Going to?" laughed Lydia. "Thought they were? They're sixty-nil up already."

"It would have been more if my brother were any good. Honestly, he keeps losing the Quaffle, he's a lousy shot, why did Marlie pick him? I could do better than that!" Autumn did not look happy.

"Probably couldn't find anyone else. Don't worry, mate. Next year, you'll be eligible for the team, and then maybe you can persuade Lovegood to try you out. I'll get Lucas to put in a word for you. Better yet, Gin could have a word with her, seeing as she's a friend of the family and all. Gin?"

Ginny sat up, startled. Lydia sighed, exasperated. Much as she had grown fond of Ginny, this habit she had of drifting off into a little world of her own was getting a little annoying.

"Wake up, Gin. This is one of the most exciting games I've seen, not least because we're winning. What's the matter, thought you liked Quidditch?"

"Oh! Yes. Yes, I do." Ginny gazed around, blinking as if she'd just been brought out of a trance. "What's the score?"

"Sixty-nil." said Lydia. Suddenly, Autumn squealed and punched the air, bouncing up and down with joy. Lydia glanced at the scoreboard, currently announcing that Slytherin Chaser No. 4 Tyler had just scored again. "Seventy-nil." Lydia corrected herself.

"That's nice." said Ginny, her mind clearly on other things.

"That's nice??" Lydia stared at her. "We're riding all over them like it's the Wild Hunt, and all you can say is 'that's nice'? What's wrong with you?"

"Lydia, leave her." said Autumn, concentrating on the game, wincing as a Bludger almost unseated Marlie. "She's probably still freaked out by Saturday night. I know I am. Where the hell are our Beaters, that's the third time a Bludger nearly got Lovegood. Tyler's had a fair few go her way too."

"Freaked out? Gin, you weren't even there. It's only Mrs. Norris. No one likes her. I bet it's some seventh years having a practical joke."

"That's not what everyone else is saying," whispered Ginny. "Half the school's going on about the Chamber of Secrets and the Heir of Slytherin, and how all the Muggle-borns'll be next. They seem to think Luella did it. Or Harry."

"Don't be silly, Gin." Lydia dismissed her friend's worries with a wave of the hand. "No way was it Martin. I mean, sure she was there, but she's Muggle-born herself. She wouldn't go around attacking other students, especially not other Muggle-borns. I don't think it was her. As for the Boy Who Lived, no one with a clue seriously thinks it was him, surely?"

"The Hufflepuffs think it was him. I heard some of them in the library talking about it."

"Like I said, no one with a clue seriously thinks it was him. Gin, they're Hufflepuffs. Insight isn't their strong point, lovey. I'm sure they're all good people, but I wouldn't depend on them as an accurate rumour source. Not that there's really any such thing as an accurate rumour source, but the Hufflepuffs are a non-starter however you look at it. And as for the Chamber of Secrets thing, come on! Just some old legend with no basis in reality whatsoever. Someone's using it to freak us all out. Don't let it get to you, Gin."

Ginny didn't look convinced. In fact, she looked even more pale and frightened than before. "Have they found out who did it yet?" she said, her lower lip trembling.

"Not yet. Don't worry, your brother and his mates aren't in trouble. I asked Lucas and he reckons that Snape said Dumbledore doesn't think a student could have done it."

"But if they're the Heir of Slytherin..." Ginny began.

"Gin," said Lydia patiently. "there is no Heir of Slytherin. It's a legend. A story. Made up by some fed up and half-crazy Slytherins who longed for the good old days when we actually had some respect and hoped that some long-lost descendant of Slytherin would turn up and get it back for us. Well, it's not going to happen, Gin. Only way for us to get that respect back is to earn it. There's no Redeemer going to lead us back to glory. Just us doing the best we can. That's what my father says anyway." Lydia sat back with the air of one used to being in the right.

"The Redeemer?" Ginny asked, puzzled. Now that wasn't a term she'd heard used before.

"Another old legend. Says there'll be two Heirs of Slytherin and the second will be called the Redeemer. She'll lead us back to the position that is rightfully ours, or so they say. Don't believe a word of it myself." said Lydia.

Ginny digested the information, looking yet more concerned. "The Redeemer's a girl?"

"Oh yes, all the versions of it agree on that. She hasn't turned up yet though. Don't think she ever will. Come on, there's a fascinating game going on here. Autumn, how are we doing?"

"Eighty-nil. Your brother just scored."

"Did he? Ooh, well done Lucas!" said Lydia, her eyes now glued to the aerial action too. Which is why she didn't notice Ginny reach into her bag and stare at the small, innocent black book lying there, her eyes troubled.

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Lydia and Autumn weren't the only ones transfixed by the game. Not far away, Rianne was also watching avidly, her eyes tracking Lucas, Deanna and Marlie's every move. "Yes! Go Lucas!" she shrieked as the score went up to eighty-nil. "Show those Ravens what you're made of!" She turned to Luella, her face glowing. "He's so talented, isn't he?"

"Absolutely, Ri." said Luella, her mind on other things. "Our reserves rule."

"Try and show a little enthusiasm, Lu. I know you hate the game, but your best mate's playing, you could at least try and look interested. She's doing really well too, five goals to her credit. A cert for the first team when Summer, Kat and Laetitia all leave, I think."

Luella didn't seem to hear her. Rianne looked at her properly and started. Luella looked far from well. Pale, anxious and looking like she'd not slept well for a while, she was not her usual cheerful self.

"You OK, Lu?" Rianne asked, concerned. "Still worried about Saturday?"

Luella nodded.

"Well, don't be. No one seriously thinks you did it. Didn't Dumbledore say it would have taken advanced Dark Magic to do that? You're good, Lu, but you're not that good."

"Try telling that to Ron Weasley. He thinks it was me. I don't blame him. I mean, him, Harry and Mione walked in and found me right there. It looked bad, Ri! Really bad. Ron leaped straight to the obvious conclusion and who can blame him? I'd have thought the same." Luella stared gloomily at her feet. "And unlike the other three, I don't even have a plausible excuse for being there. They were on their way back from some ghost party. What's my excuse? I felt compelled by some weird power to get up and head over there? Yeah, that really makes me sound like a sane, normal, law-abiding member of society, doesn't it?"

Rianne put her arm round her. Luella seemed close to tears. However, she pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry, mate. I don't want to ruin your evening. Let's talk about something more cheerful." Luella dried her eyes and tried to smile. "How's the bet with Marlie going? Got rid of the craving yet?"

"No." muttered Rianne. "Bloody hell, Lu, I preferred it when you were all depressed and weepy on me. Did you have to remind me of it? My god, look at me. It's only been four days if that and already I'm suffering. I can't sleep, can't concentrate on my work, all I can think of is Tetris, Tetris, Tetris. Help me, Lu!" She looked at her friend, wild-eyed.

"It's only a game, Ri. You'll cope without it, I'm sure. Three more days and you'll have done a whole week."

"Only a week!" moaned Rianne. "It feels like years. Gods..." She seemed to come to a decision. "Right. That does it. I can't go on like this and I definitely can't live without my Tetris. I'll have to cheat. Lu, that Dicta-Quill of yours. Can it be re-programmed to do someone else's handwriting? Marlie's, for instance."

"Rianne! That's unethical. Forget it. I am not helping you forge a letter to Marlie's father to get him to send Tetris up here. No. Out of the question. Stop looking at me like that. It won't get you anywhere."

Rianne was giving Luella her best innocent and wide-eyed please-take-pity-on-me look.

"Please? I'm really suffering here. It's horrible! You don't want me to start going nuts, do you? You don't want to see me make a fool of myself on a broom, do you?"

"Make a fool of yourself? You won't. You can actually fly. You're better than me, for a start."

"Lu, please don't think I'm being catty or anything here, but Neville Longbottom's toad is better at flying than you. No offence. Besides, it's not the forfeit that bothers me! It's the withdrawal symptoms. Do you know that last night I had a dream about falling blocks?" said Rianne, a sense of urgency and desperation in her voice. Luella was reminded of the time they'd had a coffee tasting session involving all the unusual and extra-strong ones from Sainsbury's, an experience which had left all of them determined never to touch the stuff again. Rianne's eyes had that same dilated appearance, and any minute now, Luella expected her to start developing that nervous twitch down her left side again.

"I gathered that." said Luella, beginning to grin. "You were screaming 'NO! Not the s-shaped ones!' in your sleep."

Rianne blushed. "Was I? Oops. Sorry. Er, the others didn't hear me did they?"

"I'm pretty certain Deanna didn't. Trust me, you'd have heard all about it if she had - she hates being woken up. As for Marlie, nothing short of full volume Metallica in her ears wakes her up once she's asleep."

"You sound like you've tried."

"Deanna and I carried out an experiment once. It was a weekend, and you'd got up early for this 'study session' with Lucas Vetinari, or so you claimed."

"I was studying!" protested Rianne.

"Hmm." said Luella, sceptical but not pushing the point. "Anyway, we tried various methods, including tickling the feet, pushing, shoving, stealing the bedclothes and saying in loud voices 'Did you hear about Fred Weasley? Got caught snogging Angelina Johnson in Professor Binns's lesson.' but to no avail. Only thing that worked was playing the Black Album on her Walkman at full volume. How ironic that a track about the Sandman is the only thing that'll wake her up."

Rianne laughed. "Poor old Marls. Tormented by her own invention. Mind you, thanks to her inventiveness, she's not the only one suffering. Damn her for adapting that Game Boy and double damn her for making this challenge for me. Lu, are you sure you won't help me forge a letter to her father? We can do it tonight, we'll have the dorm to ourselves, they'll both be off celebrating their win. Please?"

"No." said Luella firmly. "Firstly, it's cheating. Secondly, they'll notice if we aren't around to help them celebrate. And most important of all, Marlie's almost certainly told her father not to send Tetris back unless he gets a letter from her with codewords known only to the two of them in it. Sorry, Stormer. Not going to happen."

"Oh." Rianne tried to put a brave face on her troubles. "Never mind. I can cope. I can manage. It's just a few weeks after all. Just a few weeks."

"Keep saying it often enough, and you might start to believe it." said Luella, smiling to herself as she turned her attention to the game. As she did so, all the Slytherins leapt to their feet cheering as Marlie swooped down between two Ravenclaw Chasers, let go of the broom and, swinging sideways so she was hanging almost upside down, neatly plucked the Snitch out of the sky, leaving the other Seeker grasping at empty air.

Even a Quidditch-phobe like Luella couldn't help applauding a move like that, as Rianne squealed and hugged her. However, in the row behind, there was one Slytherin not applauding. A Slytherin who hadn't even seemed to notice there was a game going on at all. A Slytherin who was now looking very, very thoughtful.

Draco Malfoy was going over all he had just heard, giving it careful analysis. Not the discussions on how to wake up Marlie Lovegood or about the bet - after all, if two Slytherins had a bet going on, there had to be cheating at some point. It was almost an unwritten law. The only reason it wasn't in the Slytherin Code of Honour was because the writers had thought it too obvious to mention. He was far more interested in the first part of the conversation, the part referring to Halloween.

His father's words before he left for Hogwarts came back to him. "If anything strange starts happening at school this year, anything at all, especially involving that Mudblood Luella Martin, I want to know about it. Understand?" Well, this certainly

qualified as strange, even by Hogwarts standards. Ignoring the cheering going on all around him, he got up and walked purposefully back to the Slytherin common room.

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A week after the attack, and most of the Slytherins seemed to have put it out of their minds. A Quidditch match against Gryffindor had a way of focusing people's attention.

"Do you think we'll win?" Deanna asked Marlie.

"I don't know." replied Marlie. "I've been watching the first team in training and Malfoy's not a bad Seeker."

"Doesn't sound good."

"Ah, but there's a world of difference between 'not bad' and 'heartstoppingly wonderful'. He's not as good as me. For example, I've yet to see him master the Corkscrew Manoeuvre." The Corkscrew Manoeuvre was a particularly tricky stunt that was one of Marlie's favourites, involving riding one's broom upside down while heading for the Snitch, catching it then righting oneself. It never failed to impress and routinely frightened the opposition.

"Marlie, no one's mastered that one, primarily because it's a bloody nightmare to do. Besides, I'm not asking whether he's as good as you. I'm asking if he's as good as Harry."

"He could be. If he could sort out that obsession he has with him. It'll ruin his game. I think the Gryffs'll do it. Today."

"Is that good?"

"Officially, no. For our purposes, absolutely." A crafty smile crept across Marlie's face. "If he loses the Snitch today, our position is that much strengthened."

"Especially after last Wednesday's game. What was the score in the end?"

"Two hundred and thirty to nil. I'm not happy though."

"Why not?" asked Deanna, confused. "Call me ignorant if you will, but that's a pretty good score in my view."

"It's not the score. It's the team." Marlie sounded like she meant business.

"What about the team?"

"The Chasers are two-thirds wonderful, one-third adequate. The Keeper is excellent. The Beaters are letting the side down. I got the official stats off Madam Hooch the other day. You and I had more Bludgers go for us than the rest of the field combined. Our Beaters are not doing their job properly, Deanna."

Deanna looked down the table at Crabbe and Goyle, who were busy having some kind of food fight. Exactly what you didn't want to see over breakfast.

"Marlie, surely you're not accusing Crabbe and Goyle of sabotaging our progress because of some petty grudge against us? They wouldn't stoop so low, would they?" Deanna looked at Crabbe and Goyle again. "What am I saying, of course they would."

"I know, I know." sighed Marlie. "Honestly, all we did was get their sibs expelled. From the way they're acting, anyone would have thought we'd done something really awful, like spilling red wine on their best white shirts or something."

"Nice to know you've got your priorities right, Marls. But what do we do about it?"

Marlie's confidence deserted her. "I don't know. I need to find some way of bargaining with them. Some way of getting them in line. As it is, the only weapon I've got is threatening to drop them and they know as well as I do that there's not really anyone else to take their place. Damn."

"Well, even when they're not co-operating, we can still beat any reserve team in the school, can't we? Can't we?"

"And when we're all on the first team and they're Beaters then?" Marlie reached gloomily for her orange juice. "I need to find a way of bringing them in line. And soon."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, Luella was chatting to Rianne.

"How are the cravings? Any better?"

"No." snarled Rianne.

"Still having the dreams?"

"Yes. And they're getting worse. I dreamt I was getting chased around Hogwarts by a selection of giant Tetris blocks all chanting 'Blocks are gonna get you! Blocks are gonna get you!' They finally cornered me in the Potions lab."

"Then what happened?" asked Luella, fascinated.

"Snape came out and dispersed them. I turned to thank him, but... he... his head..." Rianne buried her head in her hands "I can't take much more of this!"

Luella brushed Rianne's hair out of her face in a simple, intimate gesture. "Poor thing. It's getting pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Horrible. I keep seeing blocks everywhere. Anything with right angles in it brings them to mind. I spent two hours staring at the dorm room wall yesterday because the brickwork reminded me of Tetris structures." She turned to look at Luella, wild-eyed. "Help me. Please! I feel like I'm losing my mind..."

Ethics and compassion began fighting a war of opposites in Luella's mind, brought swiftly to an end when compassion caught ethics in a headlock and rammed her repeatedly against a wall until she submitted.

"All right." she heard herself saying. "All right. We'll skip the match, we'll say we need to study. Everyone'll believe that, we're not big Quidditch fans, either of us."

"Speak for yourself, love! But if it'll help me hold on to my sanity, I'll do it."

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Luella closed the door behind her. Deanna and Marlie, while raising their eyebrows in that infuriating way that only Slytherins can, hadn't made any objections, just a few comments on Quidditch-phobia and how it could be easily cured by hypnotherapy these days. Rianne and Luella had gritted their teeth and smiled, but it hadn't been a complete waste of time. Because it had given Luella an idea.

"So what exactly are you going to do then?" inquired Rianne.

"Going to use a bit of the old Glamoury on you. Muggles have something similar for use with treating hang-ups and compulsions. My dad tried it when he was giving up smoking ages ago. Can't believe I didn't think of it myself - I did exactly the same thing for Marls when she lost her Quidditch nerve back in the first year." Luella sat down on her bed, beckoning for Rianne to join her.

"This doesn't hurt, does it?" asked Rianne as she took a seat alongside Luella.

"Of course not. You won't feel a thing. All you need to do is just look into my eyes, breathe deeply, and just relax. That's right, just relax, let it all go." crooned Luella, as Rianne began to look a little less anxious. Confident that Rianne was ready, Luella switched on the power. "Feel your cravings disappear. Feel your need for Tetris vanish. The blocks don't bother you. The thought of playing a Game Boy is far from your mind. Your life is your own again. You're free of your addiction. You're..." Luella took a moment to look at Rianne, expecting to see her in the familiar blank-eyed trance. It was quite a shock therefore to see Rianne looking back at her perfectly clearly with a slightly bemused look on her face.

"Well? You started yet?"

"Of course I've started!" snapped Luella. "You're meant to be in a trance at the moment! What's wrong with you?"

"Oh. You mean that's it? I must say, Lu, if that's Glamoury in action, I'm rather disappointed. I was led to believe it was some kind of all-powerful force that could have people prostrating themselves at your feet."

Luella started pacing the floor, beside herself. "Why isn't it working? I wasn't doing anything different. It's always worked before! I mean, Marlie and Deanna go under like a shot." She spun back to face Rianne. "What's wrong with me?"

"Well, maybe it's just the hypno-thingy's not working. Try your invisibility."

Luella nodded once and starting walking across the room. Rianne's eyes never left her. As Luella turned back to face her, Rianne just shook her head.

"Nope. You're still very much there. Try something else."

"OK, OK. I'll try for adoration." Leaning back against one of the posts of Marlie's bed, Luella went for her strongest 'worship me' effect.

"How's this?" she purred.

"No good. You look like a tart."

Luella's mood deflated. "Oh. All right then. What about fear?" She pounced onto Deanna's bed, trying her 'beware' pose. At least, she tried it until Rianne started laughing.

"What?" Luella screamed at her. "Stop laughing at me! I mean it!"

"Sorry." giggled Rianne. "It's just that... you... trying to look scary..." She went off into another fit of laughter.

Luella folded her arms, sulking. "Cut it out! How am I meant to concentrate on anything with you laughing at me!"

Rianne dried her eyes. "Sorry, mate. Maybe you're having an off day or something."

"Glamourers do not **have** off days! Caitlin says the power is constant. It has never failed before, ever. Granted I don't use it much, but even so! What's wrong with me, Ri?"

Seeing her friend so depressed brought Rianne's laughter to an end. Getting up, she went to comfort her.

"Hey, don't worry, Lu. I'm sure there's a perfectly good reason for this. Look, why don't we go and join the game, see how it's going. Take your mind off things. Then, afterwards, you can try out your powers on some unsuspecting person and see what happens. It'll be OK, Lu. You're the Redeemer after all, and Slytherin Redeemers do not simply lose their powers just like that. Come on. Let's go." She helped Luella to her feet and led her out. Luella, too shocked to do anything, acquiesced.

"I'll tell you what, though." Rianne mused as she accompanied her friend out of the Serpents' Nest. "Your Glamoury may not have worked, but you've done me some good. You've taken my mind off Tetris."

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A few hours later and the Slytherins were gathered in their common room analysing the match. Most were in a less than cheerful mood. Apart, that is, from Marlie and Deanna.

"Where is he?" asked Marlie, her eyes scanning the room. "I want to be the first to congratulate him."

The common room door flew open.

"Don't look now, Marls," murmured Deanna, "but I think this might be them just coming in."

She was proved right immediately as Draco Malfoy staggered into the room, closely followed by Flint, who did not look happy.

"Look, how many times do you want me to apologise?" snapped Draco. "I'm sorry, all right?"

"Sorry won't get us our points back, will it?!" raged Flint. "Sorry won't give us the edge against Gryffindor, will it? Catching the Snitch when it's virtually next to you, on the other hand, now that'll win us points. What with you being Seeker and all. Do I have to sit you down and explain the rules of this Quidditch thing to you again?"

"OK, OK, you've made your point." Draco muttered. "I won't do it again."

"Bloody right you won't. Make that kind of stupid mistake again and you'll be off the team, brand new racing brooms or no brand new racing brooms." Flint threw up his hands in exasperation. "Come back Marlie, all is forgiven. Your cousin may have had a bit too much sympathy for the opposing team, Malfoy, but at least she knew what she was doing. More than I can say for you."

Draco didn't answer. He was already walking off, the look on his face indicating than anyone who dared even mention Quidditch would be for it. Marlie and Deanna were waiting for him.

"Well, well, well, it's our new little Seeker star." drawled Marlie. "How did you find it? Not as easy as it looks, is it?"

"That'd be down to your skill and talent, Marls. Making it look so effortless must have given Malfoy here a false idea of what it really involved."

"I gathered that." Marlie had dropped all pretence of charm and gone straight into full-blown sarcasm. She dangled her Snitch necklace in front of him. "See this, Malfoy? This is called a *Golden Snitch*. Your job is to *catch* the Golden Snitch. That's because you're a *Seeker*."

"Shut up, Lovegood." Draco flung himself into a nearby antique mahogany chair. "I've heard it all from Flint several times over. And you can stop smirking too, Tyler."

"Me? Smirk? Never. I wouldn't dream of taking delight in your misfortune, Malfoy."

"Makes a bloody change." Draco muttered.

"You showing yourself up because you're not up to the job, on the other hand, is fair game." Deanna was lounging back in an armchair, feet on the table, arms behind her head, grinning as she'd never grinned before. "Looks like talent is the one thing money can't buy, eh Lovegood?"

Marlie and Deanna both started laughing. Draco got up, seething.

"When you've both quite finished mocking me...!"

"Us? Finished?" Marlie's eyes widened.

"Not yet, Malfoy. Give us a bit longer, until we've exhausted all the possibilities for humour and no longer find it amusing."

"So, a few weeks then."

"Maybe a month."

"Or two."

"Or three."

"Or more."

"All term."

"All year."

"Next year, that is."

The two girls both dissolved into fits of laughter. Draco could take no more.

"I hate you two! You're always picking on me, it's not fair!" He stamped his feet and folded his arms in a huff, causing the two girls to snigger even more.

"Aw, is ickle Drakie-wakie all upset?" Deanna pulled her best motherly expression. Marlie was not slow to catch on.

"Ahhh, do that horrid Deanna Tyler and that nasty Marlie Lovegood keep picking on you? Aww, come here, Drakie-poo, tell Mummy all about it."

"Leave me alone." snapped Draco, storming off in a sulk, heading for Pansy Parkinson and some guaranteed sympathy. Marlie and Deanna exchanged guilty looks before the urge to snigger overwhelmed them.

"Do you think we perhaps went a bit too far there?" asked Deanna.

Marlie shook her head. "Nah. Come on, he can hardly accuse us of always picking on him when the vast majority of fights between us are the ones he starts. And if he's going to act like a toddler, he can't complain when we treat him like one. Anyway, did you see the look on his face?"

Deanna nodded, drying her eyes. "Poor baby. He's going to kill us. Ah, but it was worth it!"

Marlie leaned back in her beanbag. "It so was! Deanna, we may have just lost to Gryffindor, but I'll tell you this. This is one of the best nights of my life!"

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Someone who was having a less than enjoyable night was Luella.

"I'm telling you Rianne, if my powers really have gone, I don't know what I'm going to do." She was sitting on a small green foot stool in a quiet corner of the common room, hunched up and staring morosely into space. Rianne was crouched next to her, trying to cheer her up.

"I'm sure you're not. I'm sure there's some perfectly reasonable explanation for what happened earlier."

"Sure there is. I'm losing my powers. It's as simple as that."

"You are not!" Rianne told her. "Has Caitlin said anything to you at any time about the possibility of losing your powers?"

"No." Luella admitted.

"There. See? If there was a chance, no matter how small, Caitlin would have told you. Anyway, you're..." Rianne looked around to check that no one was listening and lowered her voice. "You're the Redeemer. You can't lose your powers, not yet. You've got a destiny to fulfil."

Luella didn't answer. Her thoughts had shifted straight to the mark now decorating her arm. She didn't know for sure, but she strongly suspected that it might have something to do with the sudden failure of her Glamour powers. However, she didn't dare confide this to Rianne.

"Maybe last year was it." Luella said softly. "Maybe he's really gone now."

"I doubt it. Anyway, that doesn't explain how three-quarters of the school still think we're scum, does it? I wouldn't call the end of last year a Redemption of Slytherin, would you? No, there's only one thing for it." Rianne got up and hauled Luella to her feet. "You're going to have to try out your powers on some unsuspecting stooge and see what happens."

"You what? Ri, that's unethical."

"It's not unethical. It's just a little test. No harm in that. Now, I notice we're almost out of sausage rolls, so you'd better talk Mike into fetching some more from the kitchen. Go on, he's over there chatting to Kat. I'll get us in, then you turn on the charm. Come on."

Luella found herself being dragged over to where the blond Beater was complaining to Kat about Malfoy's performance.

"Honestly, bloody awful, even I could have spotted the Snitch from there. Marlie wouldn't have made that mistake, I'm tellin' ya - oh, hello. What do you two want?"

"Hi, Rianne. Everything OK?" Kat asked, smiling warmly at her sister.

"Yes, thanks. We just wanted a word with Mike here. I couldn't help noticing that there's no sausage rolls left. Any chance you could slip off to the kitchens and grab some more for us?"

"Not a hope in hell." yawned Mike. "I'm quite happy here, thanks. Anyway, it's getting late, and if I get caught, there'll be hell to pay. Even if I am a Prefect."

"Oh." said Rianne, disappointed. "Please?"

"No."

Rianne turned to Luella, giving her a meaningful look. "Lu, you have a go."

Luella pulled herself together, took a deep breath and went for it. Here it was. The moment of truth. Did she still have what it took?

"Go on, Mikey." she coaxed, giving her best smile, and turning on the power for all she was worth. "You know you want to. You'd love to get us some more food, wouldn't you? You do really. In fact, you'd like nothing better."

Mike stared blankly at her, going straight into the familiar trance. Shaking himself, he soon snapped out of it, his manner now brisk and efficient.

"Right. Let's get on with it then. Sausage rolls, was it? Right you are. See you all soon. I won't be long." With that, he turned and left the common room.

Kat turned to look at the two fourth years in amazement. "How on earth did you do that?"

"Natural charm." said Luella, praying that Kat wouldn't probe too deeply.

"Yeah, Lu's really persuasive. Don't know how she does it." Rianne added.

"Well, I wish you'd teach me. That was amazing!" Kat seemed in awe. "Anyway, be seeing you both." She wandered off to chat to Summer.

Rianne turned to Luella. "See? That worked like a dream. You've clearly got what it takes still."

"Yeah." Luella tried to fathom out what was going on. "So why didn't it work on you? I could feel the power going, I was doing everything I did with Mike just then. So why didn't it have any effect on you?"

Rianne shrugged. "No idea, Lu. But I'm wondering whether it isn't you but me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Kat seemed really impressed. And it was impressive seeing Mike suddenly change his mind so quickly. But I didn't see anything special in what you did. No power or anything. Just you smiling and telling him what to do. I mean, Marlie can do that."

"Doesn't send the other person into a trance though, does it?"

"No. That's a definite magical power of yours. So why wasn't I affected? I know you were aiming it at Mike, but according to Caitlin, others around you can sense the use of the power and will be affected by it in lesser ways. Not me, though."

It began to dawn on Luella what Rianne was talking about. "Ri, are you saying you could be immune somehow?"

"Why not? Stands to reason it might not work on everyone. Maybe I'm one of those it doesn't affect."

Luella digested the information. It had never occurred to her that there might be people out there that Glamoury didn't work on. Caitlin had never mentioned the possibility. But then again, she'd never asked her. And it was a far less disturbing prospect than the idea that her powers might be failing.

"Maybe. Maybe. I'll have to run it by Caitlin, see what she thinks, but yeah, that's not a bad idea! Blimey, I'd better watch it around you from now on."

"What, you mean you weren't before?" grinned Rianne.

"No, you always seemed so harmless - argh!" Luella clutched her arm in pain.

"Lu? Lu, what is it? Are you all right?" Rianne's voice was filled with concern as she reached out to her friend.

"Yeah." gasped Luella. "Yeah, I'm OK. Just my arm hurting. Just let me sit down out of the way, I'll be fine."

"You don't look fine! In fact, you look like you're in agony." Rianne led Luella over to the other side of the common room, pulling up a chair for her. In the noise and chatter that was the Serpents' Nest post-Quidditch match, no one noticed. Rianne waited as Luella sat down, clutching her right arm, her face contorted in pain.

"Lu, talk to me. What is it? Don't tell me you're fine, you're clearly not! What's with your arm?"

"Nothing!"

"Doesn't look like nothing to me. Here, let me look."

"NO!" yelled Luella. "I mean, no. No, it's all right. Don't fuss, Ri. I'll be all right."

"Do you want to go to the hospital wing?"

"No! No, I told you, I'll be fine. Just leave it."

Rianne looked sceptical. "Well, if you're sure... If it gets any worse though, I'm taking you straight to Madam Pomfrey."

Luella nodded, unable to summon up the strength to say anything more. Rianne didn't force her to talk, just sat with her, waiting for Luella to recover. The minutes ticked by. The pain seemed to ease a little, but Luella still looked far from happy. In fact, as time went by, she began to fidget, eyes anxiously flitting around the room.

"What? Lu, what is it? Talk to me, what's going on?" Rianne was feeling a little panicky herself by this stage.

"Something's happening. Something bad. Don't know what, but something really evil is happening somewhere."

"Right." Rianne got to her feet, her mind made up. "That's it. No more messing around. Hospital wing. Come on."

"No! No, I'm not going! Ri, there is absolutely no need!"

"Don't give me that, if you looked any unhealthier, you'd be Gothic Babe of the Week. Come on! We're going."

Despite her protestations, Luella found herself dragged to her feet.

"Rianne, let me go, please! I'm fine, put me down, I mean it - argh!" The pain in her arm reached a sudden crescendo. Luella sank to her knees, her eyes watering. Rianne let her go immediately and dropped to her side, shaking her.

"Lu. Lu, talk to me! Lu?"

Luella's breath was coming in ragged gasps as she fought to get some semblance of equilibrium back.

"God, that really hurt."

"You're telling me!" Rianne was staring at her as if she'd gone mad. Which, to be honest, probably wasn't far off the mark. "What's happening?"

"Don't know. But whatever it is, it's gone. The pain's gone." Using Rianne as balance, Luella slowly hauled herself back to her feet. "It's gone."

"Sure? I mean, are you sure it's gone?"

"Yeah." Luella shook herself. "Yeah, it's gone. Just tingling a bit, that's all."

Rianne still seemed wary. "Lu, you are really starting to worry me. I'm sure you're not up to anything, but I'm equally sure you are acting very strangely. Is there something you want to tell me? Something you want to get off your chest?"

Luella bit her lip, torn. Should she tell Rianne everything or not? On the one hand, she was desperate to talk to someone. On the other, she was terrified of how Rianne might react. In the end, she decided to opt for obfuscation.

"I don't know. I really don't. All I do know is that a lot of weird things have been happening lately. And when bizarre things start happening in my life, it usually means trouble."

"You can say that again." sighed Rianne. "I don't know how you deal with it sometimes. You-Know-Who last year, and Gods-Know-What this year."

"Who'd be me, eh?" laughed Luella, trying to put a brave face on things. "Wonder what a quiet life's like. Wouldn't mind trying it one of these days."

"You'd be bored within minutes. Come on." Rianne led Luella over to the buffet table. "Let's get you some food, calm your nerves. You look like you could do with it."

Food. Now that was an appealing prospect. Giving in, Luella let herself be led where Rianne willed.

A pair of brown eyes watched them go. Pansy Parkinson, head tilted to one side like a forgotten childhood toy's, was standing there, expertly plucked eyebrows raised in wonder. And judging from the smile playing around lips not coloured by anything other than human hands, she had heard every word.

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Ten minutes later, and Luella was almost back to normal. It was amazing what chocolate biscuits and a cup of tea could do for one's mood.

"Feeling better?" Rianne asked her.

Luella nodded. "Much better. Thanks, Ri. I appreciate it."

"Hey, what are friends for? You needed help. I gave it to you. It's as simple as that. Of course, I'm also sure that there is a lot more going on that you're not telling me about, but because I'm a friend of yours, I'm not going to pry. I'm just going to let you tell me in your own time, when you're ready."

"If only it were that simple." sighed Luella.

"If it was simple, it wouldn't be happening to you. You are not fated for a quiet, simple life. But Lu, please do one thing for me."

"What?" Luella asked, her heart sinking. Rianne's expression combined concern with a certain firmness that wouldn't take no for an answer.

"If things get any worse, go and talk to Professor Snape. Or Caitlin. Anyone. Just don't keep it to yourself. You're not alone in this, you know!"

"How bizarre. You were the most reluctant to be involved in this whole thing, and now you're saying you want to help me?"

"Don't be like that, Lu. I know I wasn't overwhelmed by the idea, but I do care about you. I do!" Rianne squeezed Luella's shoulder, a simple gesture of comradeship that touched Luella more than mere words would have. Smiling, she patted Rianne's hand.

"Thank you. It's nice having you on side."

"Yes, isn't it. Now, this promise you were going to make. That if things get any worse, you're going to talk to Professor Snape. Well?"

Luella squirmed. Talking to Snape really didn't appeal, especially not given their recent history. Then there was the nagging fear that this time he wouldn't support her. That this time, he'd either be unable to help, or back away from her, repulsed. And yet, she didn't want to have to lie to Rianne...

Fortunately, she was saved from having to reply by the sound of the common room door bursting open. As one, the entire room fell silent, turning to look.

Mike Lovegood rushed back in, his face pale. No sausage rolls in sight. Instead, he slammed the door shut and turned to face his fellow Slytherins.

"No one is to leave the Serpents' Nest tonight for any reason whatsoever." he announced to them all.

The entire room erupted in cries of protest.

"What?" "Why on earth not?" "Who died and made you Headmaster?"

Mike motioned for silence. "Never mind all that. Point is, no one's leaving until morning. I ran into Snape just now."

The room fell silent. Professor Snape rarely imposed direct commands on them - it wasn't his style and they all knew it.

Marlie was first to speak up. "Yeah, and? What did he say? Why are we all confined here? It's not that late, not really." It was quarter to ten in the evening, and only the

first four years were subject to curfew, the fifth and sixth years being allowed out until ten, and the seventh years until eleven.

"Because..." Mike took a deep breath, as if to brace himself for the giving of bad news. "There's been another attack."

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Chapter Nine Trouble Brewing

Luella immediately turned to Rianne.

"No. Ri, no!" she whispered, the colour draining out of her face. Rianne immediately put a protective arm round her.

"Lu. It'll be all right. You're safe. You were with me all day, no one'll dare accuse you."

Luella wasn't comforted. Trembling, she allowed Rianne to pull her into an embrace, resting her head on her shoulder as Rianne tried to soothe her.

All around them, the initial silence had dissolved into whispers, anxious, tense whispers. An attack on Mrs. Norris could be dismissed as the work of someone with a grudge against Filch - as Lucas Vetinari was fond of saying, not exactly a small group of people. A second attack, however, was not so easily dealt with.

"Another attack? Who? Not one of us!" breathed Laetitia Vetinari. Mike shook his head.

"No. A Gryffindor first year. Colin Creevey."

Blank looks were exchanged, along with quite a few sighs of relief now that they knew it was only a Gryffindor who'd been attacked.

"Who's Colin Creevey?" Goyle was heard asking.

"Potter's Stalker." Draco replied, seemingly unaffected by the news. "You know, that idiot with the camera who's always following him around."

"Potter? What, Harry Potter?"

Draco turned to see who had spoken. Pansy.

"No, Pansy, I'm talking about the less well known Dave Potter, a plumber from Liverpool. Yes of course Harry Potter, who did you think I meant?"

"Interesting that Harry Potter's one of the first on the scene when the first attack happens, and now his stalker gets it in the neck the second time round." Pansy purred.

Unfortunately for her, Deanna overheard her.

"Don't be an idiot, Pansy. Harry Potter, of all people, dabbling in the Dark Arts? Professor Dumbledore's more likely to be behind it than Harry! Still, at least you're not accusing Lu anymore."

"Hey, that's a thought. Where is Martin anyway?"

"She's over here." Rianne's voice cut through the backdrop of whispering that was now going on as every Slytherin was discussing the attack with every other Slytherin. "With me. Where she's been *virtually all day*." Pansy shrank back from the look Rianne was giving her, a silent, frozen dare to contradict her.

"She could have slipped off without you noticing-" Pansy suddenly became aware that both Deanna and Rianne had moved in on her, cutting her off from her friends and cornering her. "No, you're right, of course it wasn't her, couldn't possibly have been her, she's far too nice, what was I thinking of?" She fluttered her eyelashes, giving her most charming look.

"Good." Deanna's voice was not one to be messed with. "Let's keep it that way, hmm? Come on, Rianne." The two older Slytherins moved off, picking up Marlie and Luella on the way and returning to their dorm.

Blaise and Millicent went to Pansy's aid.

"Are you all right, Pansy?" Blaise asked her.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine." Pansy glared at the retreating Slytherins. "They won't be though. Not if there's any justice in the world. I've got a score to settle with that lot still. Where's Draco gone, I need to talk with him." Her eyes narrowing, she scanned the room for any sign of Malfoy. "That Mudblood's hiding something. And I'm not giving up until I find out what it is."

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The fourth year dorm room proved to be something of a microcosm of the Slytherin common room that night. Luella seemed too stunned to say anything, trembling all over. Rianne was sitting with her, one arm round her shoulders, trying her best to comfort her but not succeeding. Deanna was pacing the floor, running her fingers through her hair, thinking hard. While Marlie was lying back on her bed, cradling Snowy in her arms, her eyes fixed firmly on Luella with a look on her face that could best be described as calculating.

"There has to be a link here, there has to be." Deanna was saying, furiously racking her brains. "What do Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey have in common?"

"Not a hell of a lot." replied Marlie. "One's loathed by almost everyone, the other's too obscure to be hated. There's only one common factor I can think of and it's a tenuous one at that."

"Well, any light you can cast on the subject would be most welcome, Marls."

"Mrs. Norris belongs to a Squib. A wizard with no magic. While Colin Creevey is a Squib in reverse - a Muggle who can do magic. There's this non-magic connection here, isn't there?"

"What are you getting at, Marls?"

Marlie's eyes did not leave Luella for a minute. "I'm beginning to wonder if my cousin might not have had a point."

Deanna was not slow to grasp Marlie's meaning. "Elaborate, Lovegood. And might I just add that I'm not sure I like where this particular line of conversation is going."

"Just that we've had two attacks now, same circumstances, same *modus operandi*, both victims Petrified, both attacks taking place late at night when the rest of the school is elsewhere. And the only thing that links the victims is that in the eyes of certain mages, they're a disgrace to the magical community." Marlie turned to Deanna, her face showing no emotion whatsoever. "I can't help thinking that maybe Malfoy was right. That maybe this Chamber of Secrets thing is more than a legend. Maybe there really is an Heir of Slytherin plotting to wipe out the Muggle-borns."

"Your point being?" The look on Deanna's face could have bored through steel. One outside her inner circle would have backed off under the weight of it. Not Marlie.

She turned back to look at Luella.

"So who do we know who's an Heir of Slytherin then?"

Luella raised her eyes to look at Marlie. While she looked drained and tired, there was no shock there. It was left to Deanna and Rianne to show that particular emotion.

"Marlie!" Deanna snapped. "Take that back, it was not Lu! I'm sure of it. She gave me her word she hadn't done it, she wouldn't lie to me! Would you, Lu?"

Luella shook her head. However, it was Rianne who answered.

"Marlie, I said it to Pansy and I'm saying it to you. Luella has not left my sight all day. It is not her behind all this. I would stake my reputation on it."

"You mean, she hasn't left your sight as far as you know." countered Marlie. "Come on, Rianne! You know what she's capable of! All she'd have to do is put you under a Glamoury trance and she'd be able to walk away without you even knowing she'd gone!"

"When you've finished talking about me as if I'm not here." Luella cut in. "I did not use Glamoury on Rianne. Truth is, I can't use Glamoury on her. It doesn't work on her. I don't know how or why, but she's immune to it. Aren't you?"

Rianne nodded. "True. Lu really did give it her best shot, but to no avail. She didn't slip away using Glamoury, I'd swear to that."

"Really." Marlie oozed scepticism. "Prove it."

Luella got up. "All right." She walked over to the fire. "You all see me?"

They nodded.

"Now you don't."

Deanna and Marlie gasped as she faded from view. While they both knew that Luella could make herself invisible using her powers, they'd never actually seen it done before. Never realised how impressive it actually looked.

Rianne, however, just smiled, her eyes not leaving the spot where Luella had been.

"This one does." Her eyes started travelling along the length of the dorm room, evidently following Luella's progress. Then back again, before stopping in front of Marlie's bed. Then moving on again, coming to a rest in front of Deanna.

"Hold out your hand, Tyler. Lu's got a present for you."

Deanna did so, bemused.

"No, other hand. To the left. No, too far. Yes, that's it."

Deanna shrieked as another hand came down over hers. Luella returned to view instantly, grinning at her friend. Removing her hand, she let Deanna look at what she was now holding. Marlie's annotated copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*.

"You little tea-leaf." laughed Deanna, tossing the book back to its stunned owner. She turned to Rianne. "You could see her, couldn't you?"

"Of course. Didn't see her so much as flicker. Just saw her walk to the other end of the room, back to Marlie's bed, pick up the book and then walk over to Deanna with it. I'm telling you, it doesn't work for me! At all. There's no way Lu could have sneaked off without my knowing. It's not her, Marls."

Marlie still looked dubious. "But if it's not her then who? She's an Heir of Slytherin. Only an Heir of Slytherin can open the Chamber and it does look like that's what's happening. So if not Luella, who is it?"

The levity in the room vanished. There was really only one answer to that particular question.

"There's only one other person who answers to that title, isn't there?" Luella's voice was rarely loud, but now it was hushed even for her. "Voldemort."

All of them winced. "Don't say it, Lu. Just don't." whispered Rianne.

"It can't be him. Not again." sighed Deanna as she sank into a chair, a look of utter weariness on her face. "What I wouldn't give for a quiet year, just once."

"But how can it be?" Marlie was now the one deep in thought. "Didn't you see him off last year? Didn't Dumbledore say that he wouldn't be back for a long time yet? How can he possibly be mounting a comeback so soon? It doesn't make sense."

"So you'd rather believe one of your mates is doing it." Deanna was not impressed.

"I didn't say that!" snapped Marlie. "Just that last I heard, Voldie's in no state to be terrorising anybody. So how on earth has he managed to get the Chamber of Secrets open?"

Not even Deanna could find an answer to that. In the end, Rianne spoke.

"Look, it's getting pretty late. I suggest we all get some sleep, it's been a draining day for all of us. Especially you, Lu. See you all in the morning." And with that, she turned in. Luella, grateful for the opportunity to creep out of the limelight, did the same. Which just left Deanna and Marlie, sitting facing each other in the dying firelight. Deanna crept over to Marlie's bed, perching on the edge.

"Well? Spill. Something's on your mind."

Marlie reached up and removed her Snitch necklace, dangling it before her. "I can tell when someone is not being entirely truthful with me, Deanna. This little talisman of mine can pick up deceit a mile off. And while no actual lies passed Lu's lips tonight, there is something she is not telling us. Something important."

"Maybe she's afraid you'll go running to your mum again." Deanna pointed out.

"If it's sufficiently disturbing, I've got every right to. If keeping it to myself is putting Lu's sanity and the lives of others at risk, why on earth shouldn't I tell Mum? I don't know, Deanna. I want to trust her, but..." She shook her head. "I just get the feeling that there is a lot more going on here than we know. Lu is hiding something. I don't blame Pansy for suspecting her - Lu's not helping her own case. Everything she's said or done is screaming 'Guilty!' I don't know what she's hiding, but if she's not causing the attacks, then it's in her best interests to come clean with us. I want to stand up for her, but if I can't trust her, then it's going to be hard! I don't know. I just don't know."

Deanna stared at her hands. While she wanted to defend Luella to the hilt, the truth was she shared Marlie's fears. Luella was acting strangely, and Deanna had a feeling that she didn't know the half of it.

"So what do you suggest we do about it."

"I don't know. I can't think straight. I need sleep. But we need to keep an eye on her, find out what is going on. Talk to Rianne too - Lu might have said something to her. I think she knows more than she's letting on - how did Lu find out that she was immune to Glamoury, I'd like to know. Then see what happens."

Deanna nodded. "OK. OK. I'll see if I can pick Ri's brains."

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They moved into action as soon as circumstances let them. As the four of them were leaving breakfast, Marlie seized the opportunity to distract Luella.

"Lu, are you busy at all?" An outsider seeing Marlie's saccharine smile would not have believed that the previous evening had seen her accusing Luella of attacking her fellow students.

"Why?" Unfortunately for Marlie, Luella knew her all too well and was not fooled.

"It's just that I need some help with my Divination homework. I didn't understand what Trelawney was saying about the Lunar Nodes at all. Could you give me a hand, Lu? Please?"

"Can't Deanna help you? Divination's one of her best subjects." Luella had better things to do than end up being talked into doing Marlie's work for her. Particularly given last night's events. Honestly, thought Luella, does she have any sense of shame at all?

"Yes, but she doesn't really go in for the theory, does she? She's great at making predictions and telling Trelawney what she wants to hear, but she doesn't really know or care about how any of the systems actually work, does she? You do, though. You know about retrogrades, inversions, Celtic Crosses and everything. You're really good at that side of things. Go on, Lu, say you will, please."

Apparently not, Luella thought. She raised an eyebrow. "Got over your fear I might attack you in your sleep then, I take it."

"Hey now, you said it wasn't you and I believe you. I'd know if you were lying. I'm sure it's just someone messing around with things they shouldn't be. Come on Lu, say you'll help me, you know you want to, please?"

Luella sighed. What Marlie lacked in shame, she made up for in persistence. Besides, there was no denying that Marlie had turned cuteness into something of an art form. It really was impossible to say no to her sometimes. Rather like kicking a kitten. Luella gave in before Marlie moved on to hurt and disappointed. "All right, all right. Honestly, anyone'd think it was you had Glamoury. Come on, let's go back to the dorm, I'll explain it all to you."

"Yay!" Marlie dragged Lu off in the direction of the dungeons. However, as she opened the Great Hall's side door to let Luella out first, she turned to Deanna and gave her a surreptitious nod.

Deanna was not slow to notice her cue, and lost no time turning to Rianne.

"Ri, can we talk?"

"Sure." Rianne cleared away her plate and got up to leave. "Let's go back to the common room then."

Deanna shook her head. "No. Somewhere private. Somewhere we won't be overheard." Not far away, Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy were both watching them with unwarranted interest. Deanna, noticing their glares, led Rianne away. "It's about last night."

Rianne, following Deanna's angry stare and seeing Pansy and Draco guiltily returning to their breakfasts caught on immediately. "I see. OK, better be the dorm then."

"Not if Marlie and Lu are studying there. We need somewhere where no one, and I mean no one, ever goes."

"In that case, there's only one place I can think of. Come on."

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"Here?" Deanna looked around in disbelief.

"Yes, here! What's your problem?" asked Rianne. "You said somewhere no one ever goes. Well, no one ever comes here."

Deanna wrinkled her nose, distastefully taking in her surroundings. "Yeah, and there's a reason for that, Ri. It's the most depressing place in the school. There are Nick Cave songs that are more cheery and uplifting than this place. You know, when I said I wanted to go somewhere no one else ever does, I meant somewhere no one else ever goes, apart from Moaning Myrtle's toilet."

"You, Deanna Tyler, are too fussy by half. What's the matter, is the Heir of Tal-y-Rhys too good for a little slumming?"

"No." muttered Deanna. "But I'd prefer not to have Moaning Myrtle in the background wailing about how everyone hates her while I'm trying to discuss important things with you."

"Well, you're in luck. No sign of her today." Rianne entered one of the cubicles, lowered the lid and sat down. "So, Tyler. What's up?"

Deanna squeezed into the cubicle, closed the door behind her and squatted down on the floor.

"What do you think. Lu, of course. I'm worried about her."

"Aren't we all." Rianne lowered her voice. "Has she said anything to you?"

"No." Deanna felt her spirits deflate. "I was kind of hoping she'd said something to you."

"Sorry, mate. I'm as much in the dark as you. It isn't her, of course."

"Of course not. Luella would not do something like that. She's not like that."

"No, she's not. And yet Marlie thinks something's up. Even you must admit that Lu's been acting oddly."

Deanna nodded, weary and defeated. "Yeah. I fear for her Ri, I really do. Granted she was with you when the last attack happened, but she's got no alibi whatsoever for the first one. Gods damn it, why couldn't she have stayed at the feast? If she hadn't gone running off like that, she'd be totally in the clear. What on earth possessed her, Ri?"

"I don't know. Any idea what was really going on for her that night?"

"None. She just said that she was being called, that she had to go and left."

"That was it? She didn't say anything else to you afterwards."

"No. Just walked out, scratching her arm. Her arm..." Deanna looked up, things beginning to fall into place. "Her upper right arm. She was scratching it when she left the Hall. And when I went back to the dorm, she was looking at it in the mirror, but she pulled her robe down when I walked in. As if she wanted to hide something."

"Wait a second. Her upper right arm?" It was now Rianne's turn for the Knut to drop.

"Yeah. Reckon it's significant?"

"I should say so. Her upper right arm..." Rianne's mind raced back to the previous evening. She turned back to Deanna. "Tyler, last night. When the second attack happened. Her arm burned. She was in absolute agony, Deanna. I had to get her into a quiet corner and sit her down until it passed. It didn't stop for ages, then it seemed to peak and die away. I didn't know what it meant but looking back, it must have happened at the same time as the attack, it must have. No wonder she wouldn't let me look at it or take her to the hospital wing."

Deanna ran a hand through her hair, processing this new revelation. "She wouldn't let you look at it? Then she knows, Ri. She knows what's happening to her, if not why. Knows and doesn't want anyone else to find out. Dear gods, this is bad."

"There's more. There wasn't just pain. She had this feeling that something really bad was going on somewhere. She must have been able to sense what was happening. She must have felt the attack going on, even though she probably didn't know what it was at the time." Rianne stared at Deanna in horror. "What the hell is happening to her, Deanna?"

"I wish I knew." Deanna whispered. "I wish I knew! Do you think it has anything to do with... you know. I mean, you know she's no ordinary student."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. I very much doubt it's a coincidence that the Chamber's been opened now. But until we can find out from Luella exactly what's going on, there's not a lot we can do."

"Well, she's not going to tell us, is she? Come on Ri, I'm her best friend, she tells me everything. It's got to be pretty bad if she's keeping it even from me. If she had any

intention of telling any of us, she would have done by now. Doesn't really leave us a lot of options, does it?" Deanna stared helplessly at her feet.

"In that case, we'd better get some help, hadn't we?" Rianne, ever the pragmatist, came to a decision. "Remember when Lu first told us? She said if we ever needed adult help to go to Snape, that he was on our side and would help us. Deanna, I think now is definitely the time. You'll have to go and talk to him."

Deanna just nodded. Worrying. Very worrying, thought Rianne. Deanna nearly always put up at least a show of resistance to talking to Snape. Granted, they all knew that Deanna liked Snape deep down, but actually showing it was anathema to her. Rianne shivered. She'd seen Deanna go through a lot of emotions in her time, but she'd never seen defeat before. And to tell the truth, she wasn't sure she liked it. Seeing Deanna Tyler uncertain and frightened wasn't a good sign. Deanna was meant to be the unstoppable and courageous one, afraid of nothing. Rianne fought back the urge to scream at her, to rage at her for daring to be so weak, for even thinking of cracking up when they needed her. When she needed her. Stop that, she told herself. Getting hysterical won't help matters. Snape'll help us. Won't he?

"OK. OK, I'll talk to him. You're right, he'll know what to do." Deanna began to cheer up, although Rianne couldn't help thinking that it seemed just a little forced. "Come on, let's go - what the?"

They were both distracted by a loud hissing noise from the end cubicle, and the sound of someone cursing under their breath. Both girls looked at each other.

"Moaning Myrtle?" asked Deanna.

"That was no ghost." Rianne's mouth was set in a very firm expression indeed. Deanna scrambled out of the way and to her feet as Rianne pushed the door open and strode out, wand in hand.

Deanna couldn't help noticing as she followed Rianne across the room that there was a cloud of purple smoke billowing into the air from the end cubicle, covering the ceiling like dry ice at a Top of the Pops shooting. Rianne was right - that was no ghost. In fact, it reminded her of that time one of Marlie's potions had gone hideously wrong and left both her and Rianne with an extra eye in the middle of their foreheads. Professor Snape's reaction had been more incredulity than anger, especially as they'd been working on a cold resistance potion at the time. Typical Marlie, really. Some people spent years trying to harness the powers of the third eye, and she went and got one in the space of one hour without even trying. Although Deanna had a feeling that that hadn't been quite what they meant.

She returned her attention to the cubicle which Rianne was even now blasting open and standing in front of, arms folded and a grim look in her eyes that reminded Deanna of her mother. Now this was going to be interesting.

Hermione and Ron were sitting on the floor either side of the toilet, Ron desperately trying to hold down the toilet lid, which was threatening to fly up in the air, no doubt owing to the purple smoke emanating from under it, and Hermione caught in the act

of stuffing a spellbook into her bag. Both had that small animal caught in the headlights look.

For a moment, none of them spoke. They just stared at each other, Ron with hostility, Hermione trying and failing to look innocent, Rianne at her most unamused and forbidding and Deanna with the grin of someone well aware that someone else was about to get it in the neck.

"And what exactly might you two be up to?" If Rianne's voice had been any more lethal, the two Gryffindors would have been dead on the spot. As it was, they were both beginning to squirm. Deanna noticed that Hermione's innocent gaze was beginning to waver.

"Nothing."

Got to give the girl full points for trying, Deanna thought. Unfortunately, even a Hufflepuff would have noticed that something was up in that sort of situation. She decided to put them out of their misery.

"Granger, there's purple smoke coming out of the toilet. What've you done to it?"

Now it was Ron's turn to speak.

"Merfolk."

"Merfolk?"

Ron's face began to match his hair as both Slytherins turned their most disbelieving gazes on him.

"Yeah, Merfolk. They live in the lake. They're having some kind of feast down there. Always does strange things to the bogs. Happens in Gryffindor Tower all the time. Doesn't your common room have the same problem?"

"No." What with one thing and another, Rianne was long past the stage where she was prepared to put up with any messing around. "And if that's a regular occurrence in Gryffindor Tower, I'd recommend a word with your older brothers. Weasley, this is a girls toilet. There's purple smoke pouring out of one of them. I want an explanation and I want it now or you're both coming with me to the nearest teacher's office. Which office is nearest, Deanna?"

"Lockhart's."

"Second nearest then. Well? I'm waiting."

Hermione stared helplessly at Ron, silently begging him for help. Ron, seemingly doing some very quick-thinking, duly obliged.

"If you tell anyone about this, we'll... we'll..." An idea came to him in the midst of his floundering. Maybe he could beat the Slytherins at their own game.

"If you say a word to anyone, we'll go straight to Dumbledore and tell him Luella's been causing the attacks." Now it was his turn to put them on the spot. Rianne could almost touch the smugness pouring out of him as he stared haughtily at them, the gauntlet well and truly thrown down. Damn him. Wasn't this sort of thing Malfoy's tactic?

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh no?" Ron threw back at her. "We heard your little chat, every word of it. So Martin's hiding something related to the attacks is she? Now that sounds dodgy. Especially given that we found her at the scene of the first one. I mean it. One word from either of you and I'm going straight to McGonagall or Dumbledore."

"Ron!" gasped Hermione. "You can't do that!"

"I can and I will. Well?"

"Weasley, if you say one word to anyone, I will personally break every bone in your..." Deanna snarled as she drew her wand. Rianne stopped her advancing on him.

"Tyler, wait." She turned back to the two Gryffindors. "You won't go to Dumbledore. Because if you do, we will tell Snape exactly what you two are doing in here, and he will get you expelled." She pointed her wand at Hermione's bag. "*Accio!*"

The book that Hermione had been trying to hide flew into Rianne's grasp, and fell open.

"It's not mine." said Hermione just a little too quickly.

Rianne turned to the front inside cover. "This book last borrowed from the library by a Miss H. L. Granger."

"Not me." said Hermione.

Rianne looked at the cover. "*Moste Potente Potions*. I don't recall it being on the second year reading list, do you?" Flipping the book open, she turned to the page that Hermione had marked and examined the bookmark. It was a pastel pink My Little Pony one. Wordlessly, she held it up for all to see.

"It's not mine! Really!" protested Hermione, going a deep shade of crimson, trying to ignore Deanna's grin and Ron's sniggers.

Rianne flipped the bookmark over and read. "This bookmark belongs to Hermione Louise Granger, aged ten and three quarters." She began to read the page that Hermione had marked. "Polyjuice Potion. Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear." Sternness had changed into gloating. "Trying to change your image, are we? While I can't blame either of you for wanting to look different, surely there are easier ways of doing it? Couldn't you just have opted for a new haircut like the rest of us?"

"Shut up." muttered Ron, glaring at her.

"Ri. Leave them alone. It's rather touching, actually." Deanna's usual grin was well and truly back in place. "Watching them get up to mischief like that. Who'd've thought Hermione Granger of all people would be brewing up illegal potions? Congratulations Mione, we didn't think you had it in you."

"No we most certainly didn't." Rianne handed the book back with a grin. "I'm impressed. Which is why I'm not going straight to Snape. Instead, I've got a proposition for you. You will forget you heard us talking. In return, we will conveniently forget we came across your little enterprise. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, Rianne."

"Good. Well done Granger, I knew you'd see sense. Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer, just glowered at the three of them.

"Well? I'm waiting, Weasley."

"Ron, just agree to it!" urged Hermione.

Still no response. Ron, stubborn to the last, remained silent, not willing to give the Slytherins one inch in the way of a concession. Deanna decided to give him a little encouragement.

"I should just like to remind you, Ron, that Snape loathes you. You're already on your last warning - give him an excuse and he'll see you out of here. Not to mention whose stores you're going to need to raid to get half the things you'll need for this potion. One word from me and you'll be out on your ear, with something a lot worse than a Howler to worry about when your mum finds out. No pressure or anything." Deanna had the smile of one who knew she could not lose.

"All right, have it your way." snarled Ron. "I'll keep quiet. You'd better keep your side of things though!"

"Don't worry, Weasley." Rianne told him. "We keep our promises. I've no wish to see you expelled. Ginny'd never recover. Come on, Tyler." Turning on her heel, she strode out. Deanna gave them one last grin before following her.

Hermione and Ron waited until the outer door closed before retrieving what remained of their potion. The cauldron was overflowing with the purple liquid, emitting smoke, bubbles and an insistent hissing noise.

"That," said Hermione, "was far too close for comfort. Thank god it was only Deanna and Rianne."

"Only Deanna and Rianne? Hah!" Ron was not pleased. "We've now got two Slytherins aware of what we're doing, and you say we escaped?"

"Ron, grow up. They won't tell anyone. In fact, I think they thought it was a great joke. You should be grateful it was Slytherins. A house less easily bribed would have turned us in. I'm more concerned with the state of this potion."

Ron peered at the smoking remains of what had once been embryonic Polyjuice Potion.

"Can you fix it?"

"Probably not. We'll have to start again. Good thing we've not stolen the rare stuff yet, I wouldn't want to have to raid Snape's stores twice." She began poring over the recipe, trying to work out where she'd gone wrong. Ron extinguished the fire and tipped the potion away.

"Gods know what that'll do to the Merfolk."

"Are there really Merfolk in the lake?" Hermione asked him.

"Couldn't tell you. There's a species that live in Scottish lakes, but I don't know if ours has any. Found out what you did wrong yet?"

"Yeah. You're not meant to add the leeches under a waxing moon. Oh well. Full moon in two days, if we raid the student stores now we can have it sorted out by then. We've only just started really, it's not like we've lost much."

"Thank Hecate for that." Their most immediate worry over, Ron turned his attention back to what was really bothering him. "So, Mione. What do you think Luella's hiding then? Must be pretty suss if two of her best mates have to sneak in here to discuss it."

"I don't know and I don't care." She laid down her book, the look on her face reminding Ron of his mother. "Ron, you're not still thinking it was her, are you? It couldn't have been her, you heard Rianne say she was with her when the second attack happened. I'm sure she's not the Heir of Slytherin."

"Yeah? Then what did Tyler mean when she said 'you know she's no ordinary student'. Something's up with her. I know it is."

"Well I hope you're not going to start telling everyone that she's been causing all the attacks. Of course she's acting strangely, she's probably worried she'll be next. Malfoy's never liked her."

"He's never liked you either, and you don't seem worried." Ron pointed out.

"That's because I'm a Gryffindor." Hermione finished packing her bag. "Right, I'll go and get some more ingredients. You wait here for Harry. I'll see you in ten minutes. And stop obsessing over Luella. I'm telling you, it's not her." She left and walked swiftly away on her errand. Ron leant back against the wall, Hermione's parting words forgotten as soon as she'd said them.

"So Lu Martin's got a secret then." he whispered, lost in his thoughts. "Well, Harry and Mione might trust you. But I don't. And I'm watching you. Oh yeah. I'm watching you."

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"Now that was an interesting little encounter, wasn't it?" laughed Deanna as she walked back to the dungeons with Rianne. "Who would have thought it, Little Miss Law Abiding brewing up something like that? Who do you think she's going to use it on?"

"No idea, but my prime suspect is Malfoy. Hope it's him anyway."

"You reckon?" Deanna's grin became even wider. "Brilliant! That does it, we're definitely keeping quiet. Blimey, why didn't they just say they were playing a joke on Malfoy? I'd have given them a hand if I'd known that."

"Now, now. He's a housemate, we should show a little loyalty."

"What, like all the loyalty he's shown us?"

"Fair point. As you were then."

"Woohoo! Malfoy's going to suffer, Malfoy's going to suffer!" Deanna chanted, doing a little dance down the corridor for the sheer hell of it.

Rianne watched her, an amused and slightly relieved smile on her face. "You've cheered up then."

"Thinking about cruel things happening to Malfoy does that to me. Anyway, it'll be OK. I'll talk to Snape, he'll sort it all out, Lu'll recover and everything'll be back to normal and we can all relax and watch Malfoy get humiliated. Sorted!"

"Don't get too cocky." Rianne warned her. "I'm sure it won't be as easy as all that."

"Ri, I'm on a high here. Don't ruin what could be a beautiful experience."

"Hey, just trying to reconnect you to reality. I don't know Deanna, you're either depressed as hell or totally manic today. Calm down, woman!"

"I've had a lot on my mind lately, I'm allowed to be a little hyper."

"Well, stop being hyper and start being concerned. We're here."

The reminder of what she had to do cut Deanna's levity short. She stopped dancing.

"Do you suppose he's in?"

"Probably. I never had Snape down as having much in the way of a life. Bet you a Galleon he's marking. In fact, I bet you two Galleons it's those assignments we handed in last week on astral projection potions."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Rather confident, aren't we? All right, you're on. See you back at the dorm. I trust you'll have my winnings ready."

"We'll have to see, won't we?" murmured Rianne. Turning away, she walked off with a rather crafty smile on her face.

Deanna meanwhile spent a few minutes gathering her courage before going in to face her House Master. Taking a deep breath, she went into the classroom and knocked on the office door.

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"Come in." she heard him call to her. Pushing the door open, she entered the room to find Professor Severus Snape going over a pile of essays. Damn. One Galleon to Rianne.

"Morning, sir." she said, trying to sound cheerful.

Severus blinked and checked his watch. "Good gods. What on earth is the matter? It's not even midday and you're up and about. Wonders will never cease. Too much to hope that you'll be using the unfamiliar experience of a Sunday morning to further your studies, I suppose."

Deanna stifled a giggle as she took a seat. "No, sir. I mean, yes sir. I mean... Oh forget it. What are you up to?"

"Marking your class's Potions assignments. And no I am not open to bribery."

"Not the ones on astral projection potions, by any chance?"

"Of course. They're the only ones I've set you recently."

"Oh." Deanna mentally swore again. Two Galleons to Rianne. Great, there went a week's pocket money. "Have you marked mine yet?"

"Yes. And nothing you can say will make me change the mark now."

"How did I do?" Deanna asked, peering at the pile of parchment in front of her.

"You got a B. It would have been an A but for the fact that your section on the uses of said potions appeared to consist entirely of things that are, how can I put this? Of questionable ethical value. On the other hand, it was better than Miss Lovegood's suggestions, over which there is no question of their ethical value."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know they had any."

"My point exactly." He laid down his quill. "So if not to try and increase your Potions grades, why are you here? I very much doubt that you're out of bed this early just to enquire after my health."

"It's not your health that worries me." Deanna sat back, playfulness dissolving into a miasma of gloom as she remembered why she'd come in the first place. "It's Lu's."

Severus nodded grimly. He'd been afraid of this. "What's wrong with her? Does it have anything to do with recent events in the school, by any chance?"

"What do you think."

"I'd be very surprised if she hadn't been affected one way or another; she's a potential target after all."

"You really have no idea, do you?" The mocking tones in Deanna's response surprised even her. "Lu a potential target, good gods, we hadn't even considered that. I could deal with that! What I can't deal with is the thought that the friend I've known ever since I can remember might be causing it."

She looked up. He hadn't reacted at all. In fact, he seemed almost frozen, a black clad statue hearing only whatever was going on inside his own mind.

"Sir?" Deanna didn't dare voice her real thoughts, which were screaming at him to talk to her, do something, anything. "Did you hear me?"

Shrugging off whatever paralysis had afflicted him, he seemed to come to life. "Yes. Yes, I heard you. She is not causing them. Is she?"

"I wish I knew. I wish I knew what was going on with her. Time was when I could read her every thought, every feeling. Whatever she was thinking, I'd know. Not now. I have no idea what is going on in her mind, but what I do know is that it isn't good. She says she's not causing them, I'm sure she wouldn't lie to me, and yet..." The words went unspoken, but Severus could guess the general gist of them.

"Deanna, what's happening? Tell me what's going on. I know what happened the night of the first attack, but has something else happened since?"

Deanna told him what had happened, starting with the Halloween Feast, then Malfoy telling them about the Chamber of Secrets, Luella's return, and the confrontations in the dorm. She noticed him nodding as she told him, as if none of this was a surprise to him. Of course, she thought, Luella must have told him what went on at the Feast, he wouldn't have let her go without some kind of explanation. But that didn't account for how he seemed unsurprised about the fight with Marlie...

"Sir," she asked, the hunch now forming in her mind too strong to deny, "this secret that Lu asked Marlie to keep. Did you know what it was? I mean, was it about you?"

Severus met her gaze calmly enough. "I don't believe that that's any of your business. However, I do know what it was. And no I am not telling you. Suffice it to say that it

does not concern the current situation. So. You leave Miss Martin alone, convinced that she didn't do it. Then what?"

"Well, nothing really happened after that. Not until last night."

"And what happened last night?"

"Well, the second attack, it got us all thinking. It got Marlie thinking. I mean, it looks like the Chamber of Secrets is real after all. That there really is an Heir of Slytherin out there. And there's only two people who have that title. Luella and... him. You know. Voldemort."

"I know."

Deanna watched him, not reassured by this in the slightest. He looked as concerned as she was.

"But... surely Lu and Harry saw off Voldemort last year. I mean, he couldn't be back so soon, could he?"

"All reason argues against it. And yet I refuse to believe that it could be Luella Martin. Not voluntarily anyway."

"But if something were controlling her? If she wasn't acting of her own free will?"

"That's a possibility." He was gazing into the distance, the look of concern turning ever so subtly into one of fear. "If someone with a less than honourable agenda had found a way of using the Redeemer's power for their own ends..." He sat up suddenly, his eyes fixing Deanna with an intensity that frightened her almost as much as his earlier anxiety had done. "What do you know? Tell me. Every little detail. It could be important."

"OK. Well, I spoke to Rianne and found out two things. First is Glamoury doesn't work on Rianne. I don't know how or why, but it doesn't affect her at all."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Does it not? How very interesting. It would appear that she's inherited some of her mother's powers then. She was immune to Glamoury as well. It's a trait that crops up from time to time, although Glamoury itself is so rare that testing one's immunity is near impossible. However, Branwen had it, and evidently so does her youngest daughter. Something worth knowing. Melissa will be fascinated. But back to Luella. What else?"

"Well, the important thing is that gives Lu an alibi for yesterday - she didn't leave Rianne's sight. She was with her when the attack happened. Which brings me to the next thing." She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. "Her arm. It burned when the first attack happened. I caught her examining it afterwards. Now Rianne tells me it burned again when the second one happened. She also says Lu had some awareness of what was going on - she knew that something bad was going on, although I'm not sure she knew exactly what. I'll tell you this though. I think it's significant. And I think Lu knows more than she's telling us."

"Her arm burned again?" Severus's brow furrowed in confusion. "But I checked her arm the first time around, and there was nothing there..." He looked sharply at Deanna. "See if you can get a good look at it for me. Let me know if there's anything unusual there. If there are any further developments, tell me at once. In the mean time, I'll have a word with Luella myself. See if she'll tell me anything."

Deanna nodded, grateful that at least something was being done now. "Thanks. Oh and sir?"

"Yes?"

"You don't really think it was her causing them do you?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't think so. Not given that she had an alibi for the second attack. On the other hand, she's clearly involved somehow. After all, she is an Heir of Slytherin, and it wouldn't surprise me one bit to learn that the opening of the Chamber of Secrets is affecting her in ways we can't even begin to understand."

"Poor thing. You know," reflected Deanna, "I'm glad I'm not in her shoes. I wouldn't want to be the Heir of Slytherin if you paid me. I'm so glad I'm just a normal witch sometimes."

"You're the heir of one of Britain's most renowned and talented magical families, you're extremely wealthy and you yourself are not short of magical power. I wouldn't say you were just another witch, would you?"

"Yeah, but there's no weird prophecies hanging over me, are there? And I've got no special powers or anything. And I didn't exactly have a privileged childhood, did I? My fath- I mean, the individual who contributed the non-Tal-y-Rhys portion of my DNA saw to that." Her eyes glinted in the firelight, a cold, hard gleam that caused Severus to shudder when he saw it. No one so young should look like that, he thought. She'd never looked more like her mother than she had in that moment. He pushed the thought of Caitlin away as quickly as it had come.

"Do you think you'll ever forgive him?" he asked, torn suddenly by a desperate desire to know, a yearning to find out if it would ever be possible to tell her and get any kind of reaction other than repulsion and hate.

"No." The firmness in her voice put an end to any doubts he might have had on that score. "The best he can hope for is that I might stop hating him. If he's really lucky, he might get upgraded to indifference."

Severus tried to keep his voice level, trying to ignore the part of his mind screaming in pain, begging Deanna not to turn away. Even her hatred would be better than indifference. Any connection was better than none. Damn it, why on earth do I always seem to get involved with women who loathe and despise me? mused Severus. First Caitlin, now her daughter. My daughter. Is it too much to ask for my own child to love me back? Not that I can exactly blame her...

"Child, don't waste your energy on hate. For your own sake, if no one else's, don't spend your entire life focusing on nothing except wishing him dead. Take it from one who's spent far too much time on hate himself that it's got a way of taking you over until there's not a lot else left. There's a lot in you that's worth saving, I'd hate to see it corrupted." Well, that was true enough. Nothing hurt him more than seeing Deanna in her angry and vengeful moments. Nothing except knowing he was the prime cause of it all.

"Oh, don't worry." Deanna was smiling, but it was an odd, twisted, malignant smile that gave him no comfort. "I'm not going to waste my entire life hating him. As if I'd let him live that long."

"Now you're disturbing me." Severus said in an attempt to restore some levity. Time to change the subject - seeing Deanna in this sort of mood struck fear into his heart for both of them. He'd clearly underestimated how much she was truly her mother's daughter, an easy thing to do when she looked more like him. "Listen, don't worry about Luella. I'll talk to her. We'll find out what's going on and work out what to do from there. It'll be all right. Don't worry."

"You're being unusually optimistic and comforting. Now you've got me worried." The vengeful look appeared to have passed and Deanna seemed back to normal. She was back to the usual display of wry amusement tempered with a knowing affection that never failed to make him smile.

"How's that?" Severus asked, relieved to be dealing with the more familiar Deanna Tyler again.

"We're all used to unsympathetic and cynical. Go on, go back to being embittered and sarcastic, it gives me an odd sense of reassurance. The sun is out, the birds are singing, Slytherin are leading the championship and Professor Snape hasn't got a good word to say about anyone. That to me is normality. Anything else is strange and discomforting. A bit like Malfoy being caring and altruistic or Pansy Parkinson not being an overly made-up tart."

Severus couldn't help chuckling to himself. "And there I was trying to reassure you. Next time, shall I just snap at you and accuse you of wasting my time?"

"If you could, sir. Otherwise I might start thinking you'd been abducted by bad poetry reciting aliens with a mission to destroy the Earth and replace it with a giant intergalactic highway, who'd proceeded to replace you with a clone whose sole purpose was to sound out the territory before betraying us all." She noticed the look of incomprehension on her teacher's face. "Never mind. It's a Muggle thing."

"Evidently. Well, if you insist on it, I will remain embittered and sarcastic. I'm sure you'll regret it, and I'm certain your fellow students will, but nevertheless, if it makes you feel better, malicious and cynical it shall be. Have you quite finished trying to prevent me from getting any work done?"

"I think so, sir."

"Excellent. The Weasley twins' essays are next. I can hardly wait to see what they've come up with. I suspect it'll make Miss Lovegood's ideas look almost legal."

Deanna couldn't help but agree. "You know, for two Gryffindors, it's quite surprising how Slytherin they are sometimes."

"There's nothing Slytherin about those two. In fact, I want them *nowhere* near my house. At all. Ever. Under any circumstances."

Deanna recalled Fred's words last year. "If they tried to put us in Slytherin, we'd leave." Then more recently, Marlie's argument with them over Ginny.

"I don't think you need worry about that, sir."

"Good. So, if you've quite finished...?"

Deanna took the hint and got up to leave. "Yeah, I'm done. Better let you get back to your work. Cheerio, sir."

"Goodbye, Miss Tyler." Severus said as she left, still smiling despite himself. However, the desire to laugh faded with the closing of the door. While he normally loved Deanna's company, this particular visit had left him with a feeling that something extremely bad was looming, and that when the storm broke, Luella Martin would be an all too vulnerable target for a lightning strike.

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Chapter Ten Never Challenge A Slytherin When Pride Is On The Line

At that particular moment, Luella Martin, if not blissfully unaware of her fate, was at least able to put it to one side for a moment. Tutoring Marlie Lovegood had that effect.

"So what *are* the Nodes anyway?"

"They're where the Moon's orbit intersects with that of the Earth. See, the Moon's orbit is tilted in relation to the Earth's. Where the plane of the Moon's orbit meets that of the Earth's, that's where the Nodes are. As you should know, given that you're very good at Astronomy."

"Oh, I know *that*. But what do they do in the chart?"

Luella had to think about that one. Truth was, she wasn't entirely sure of the point of them herself. They always seemed a bit unnecessary. The astral equivalent of one's navel, you couldn't have a chart without them and yet you could probably get all the key themes into an interpretation without referring to them once.

"Erm, they're all to do with karma. See, you've got the North Node over here, in between Earth and Sun. Then, on the other side, you've got your South Node."

Marlie was still looking very confused. "So what does that have to do with karma?"

Luella sighed. This was clearly going to be a long day. "Can't you figure it out yet?"

"No."

"Bloody hell, Marls. OK, look, the South Node's behind the Earth. Now, how might this relate to your pattern of incarnation?"

"Er..." Marlie sat up, inspiration seeming to dawn. Luella couldn't help but marvel at how it really was almost like seeing a little light go on. She began to wonder what would happen if Marlie got concussed. Would there be stars and little birds flying around her eyes perhaps? Worth experimenting with... no, that would be cruel, she reminded herself.

"Does it refer to your past lives?" Marlie hazarded a guess.

"Oh, well done!" At last! A breakthrough. Luella began to see just why Professor Snape seemed so routinely cynical. Not to mention how pleased he seemed when a favoured student of his did well. Luella's mind began to wander, all sorts of fantasies of Snape being impressed with her, admiring her and suddenly noticing how unbelievably pretty she was beginning to form. It was a struggle to bring herself back to reality. Stop that at once, Lu, she told herself. As if he'd be interested in you... Back to attempting to educate Marlie.

"Yes, Marls, the South Node refers to all the things you've brought over from your past life, both good and bad. On the one hand, it represents things that you feel comfortable with and can deal with easily, but on the other, too much time spent on them will only cause you to stagnate. And the North Node?"

"Future lives!" Once ignited, Marlie's enthusiasm was hard to stop.

"Not quite. It represents all the lessons you've got to learn this time around, all the things you've got to aim for, the things which'll challenge you."

"Right. Well that seems straightforward enough. Blimey Lu, why didn't you say so before? That's easy. So what's that got to do with the Dragon then?"

"Dragon?" It was now Luella's turn to look confused. "What dragon?"

"The one Trelawney was talking about. You know, that bit where she went all mystical and started banging on about the Node Dragon that encircled the Earth and how the Nodes were evil and cursed and things."

"I think she might have been referring to the fact that eclipses take place close to the nodal axis. People used to think it was a dragon swallowing up the sun, that's why they got the dodgy rep."

"Oh." A pause. Luella felt her body tense as she waited for the next question. "So why didn't she just say that?"

"Marls, it's Trelawney. Since when has she ever said anything clearly? Obfuscation is what she does."

"Well it's bloody irritating. I mean here we are trying to *learn*, and she has to go and make it as confusing as possible just to try and impress us." Marlie gestured dismissively. "Honestly, I don't know how Deanna does so well in that subject. I should have taken Rianne's advice and done Arithmancy instead."

"Yeah, you should." Luella muttered.

"What was that, Lu?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Oh." Marlie shrugged. No point bothering Luella. Especially not when she had something important to discuss with her. "Hey, Lu. Talking of obfuscation."

"Yes?" Luella found herself automatically on her guard again. Marlie's innocent and bemused manner had shifted to something quite the opposite.

"Tell me. You know Ri's immune to Glamoury?"

"Yes?"

"So how did you find out? I'm curious. After all, it's not something that just crops up in conversation, is it?"

Now here was a dilemma. Luella was not fooled by Marlie's smile in the slightest. Last night's confrontations were just a little bit too fresh in her mind for her to believe that Marlie was 'just curious'. She's testing me, Luella thought. She wants to make sure I wasn't trying to use my powers to bewitch Rianne into not thinking I'd left her, so I could slip off to do the next attack. Her eyes travelled to the Snitch around Marlie's throat, glimmering innocuously in the firelight. She'll know if I lie to her, thought Luella. On the other hand, she didn't really want to land Rianne in trouble, which telling the truth certainly would.

"Come on," cooed Marlie, "you can tell me. I won't tell anyone."

"Yeah?"

"I won't! Honest!" Marlie protested.

"Hmm." Luella went over her options. Lying not really a good idea. Nor was keeping quiet - she didn't want to give Marlie any more reasons to be suspicious. Telling the truth, on the other hand, would land Rianne right in it. But then, hadn't Rianne been trying to cheat anyway?

Once again, compassion and ethics went to war, but this time, ethics got the upper hand, with a little help from a desire to stay out of trouble.

"Oh, all right. You might not like it though."

"Why?" Now it was Marlie's turn to be wary. "What is it?"

"Well, you know that bet you and Rianne have got going."

"The one I'm going to win, yes."

"Funny, that's what Ri was worried about too. So she asked me to use Glamoury on her so she wouldn't have to put up with Tetris cravings any more. Only it didn't work. At all. Not in the slightest. Nothing had any effect whatsoever. Anyway, we waited until the post-match party, then tried it out on someone else - your brother, interestingly enough. And it worked. So we deduced from that that Rianne must be immune somehow. That's how."

Marlie had gone very quiet hearing all this, and her mouth was set in a very firm line indeed.

"I see." she said, when Luella had finished. "I see. Rianne Stormosi, you cheating little..."

"Slytherin?" suggested Luella.

"Among other things. I'll kill her, I swear it." Marlie was now pacing the room in fury, eyes blazing. She spun round to face Luella. "You are telling the truth, aren't you? Rianne *is* immune, isn't she? You haven't actually got rid of her cravings, have you?"

"Not as far as I know, although she seems to be having less of them lately."

"Good. Because if her alleged immunity turned out to be a plot, or some idea you'd implanted for your own nefarious reasons..."

"Marlie!" snapped Luella. "For the last time, it wasn't me." She got to her feet, staring Marlie straight in the eye. "Be very grateful Deanna isn't here. As it is, you're in luck. I'm not nearly as highly strung as she is. Now. I did not cause those attacks. Do you believe me or not?"

Silence. Marlie stared right back, not a trace of shame anywhere. Slowly, she reached up and fingered her Snitch necklace. Luella held her breath. Then, the tension dissolved as Marlie smiled. And for once, there was no manipulative intent behind it.

"Yes. Yes, I believe you." She let go of the necklace. The smile vanished. "But if you ever, ever, interfere in any bets of mine again, you'll get such a slapping, Lu Martin!"

"Consider it payback for you going to your mother. Do you have any idea how furious Snape was with me?"

Marlie had the decency to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Lu. I just... I just hated the idea of you getting all upset over it, and I thought that seeing as Mum knew them both, she'd be able to sort it out. I didn't mean to get you in trouble with Snape, honest.

Sorry, mate." She looked away, blushing furiously, the guilt on her face an unfamiliar sight, but a gratifying one.

"Thank you." Seeing Marlie Lovegood actually feeling guilty was a sight rare enough to satisfy Luella. "So, friends again?"

"Friends." smiled Marlie, looking rather relieved. However, if Luella thought the moment was going to last, she was disappointed. Marlie flung herself down on her bed, her usual calculating look back in place. "So Rianne's cravings are easing, are they? That's not so good. And trying to cheat too. Still, it's not like I hadn't expected something of the sort, and at least it didn't work. I shall have to have words with Miss Stormosi."

Luella's ears were caught by the sound of approaching footsteps, a casual, measured tread that belonged only to one person that Luella knew of.

"Looks like you're about to get your chance. She's here."

Sure enough, the door opened and Rianne sauntered in.

"Morning, folks. How's things?"

"Morning, Rianne."

"Morning." Marlie had a gleam in her eyes which usually meant trouble. "So, Ri. How's the old withdrawal symptoms?"

"Yeah, not bad." Rianne settled down on her bed, leaning back, totally at ease with herself. She certainly didn't look like someone who, only a few days ago, had been pacing up and down the common room, sitting down, getting up again, doing a bit more pacing and when asked if she was all right, had snarled abuse at the asker in a most uncharacteristic manner.

"Are they unbearably painful and horrible?" grinned Marlie as she sat down next to her. "Have the dreams, jitters, short temper and not knowing what to do with yourself matured into hallucinations, voice hearing and stark, raving obsession yet?"

"Not yet." Rianne turned to Marlie, with a Canderel smile that rivalled even Marlie's. "In fact, I'm feeling quite calm at the moment. Quite relaxed. Don't know what I was worried about."

"Relaxed?" No mistaking the venom there. Luella settled into her chair. This was going to be fun.

"Oh yeah. The trembling's stopped, look." Rianne held out her hand for inspection. No movement. "I don't recall dreaming last night either. You know, I think I'm going to make it."

"Make it?" No trace of a smile on Marlie's face. In fact, she now looked horrified. However, she was quick enough to control herself. "But Rianne, you love Tetris. You're practically addicted to it. Have you gone off it already?"

"I wouldn't say that." purred Rianne. "But it's only a game, after all."

"Only a game?" Marlie's self-control was finally beginning to crack, and the pseudo-innocent smile on Rianne's face knew it all too well.

"Well, obviously. I mean, it's just one more of your Muggle toys, isn't it? Hardly one of life's necessities. I'm not addicted to your CD player, am I?"

"Yeah, but you were never on the CD player 24-7, were you?" Marlie pointed out.

"True. But it's amazing how quickly you get over something when it's not around, isn't it?" Rianne glanced in the direction of the door, seemingly listening for something. Sure enough, another set of footsteps was approaching. "That'll be Tyler." said Rianne, leaning back with a look of satisfaction. "Taciturn, sulking and in the foulest of foul moods." Without giving the door another glance, Rianne settled back against the pillows and held out her hand expectantly, ignoring the bemused looks that Marlie and Luella were giving her.

Sure enough, the door burst open and Deanna entered, distinctly fed up. Her expression did not change on seeing Rianne's outstretched hand. Instead, she simply stormed over to her trunk, reached in for her moneybag, fumbled around inside it and came up with two golden Galleons. The coins were dropped in Rianne's hand without a word and Deanna turned and flung herself down on her own bed.

"Told you." said Rianne, her calmness contrasting with Deanna's as yet unverbaised tantrum as she slipped the coins into her own moneybag.

Marlie exchanged a look with Luella, who appeared as confused as she was. "So, er, would one of you like to explain for the benefit of those of us not part of the exclusive Tyler-Stormosi universe just what the hell was going on there?" Marlie asked, not stinting on the sarcasm.

"Just settling a debt." Rianne replied. "Weren't we, Tyler?"

Deanna didn't reply. She just glared at Rianne and muttered something about Slytherins who were too lucky by half. Rianne grinned and ignored her.

"Deanna and I had a little wager going." she explained.

"Oh. Right." Luella looked at Deanna, who still didn't seem quite able to believe she'd just lost two Galleons. "What about?"

Deanna finally deigned to speak. "She bet me that Snape would not only be in, but that he'd be marking. And that he'd be marking our astral projection essays."

"I take it he was, then." said Luella, beginning to smile.

"Did he tell you how we'd done?" asked Marlie. "Did he mention mine?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"You're doomed."

"Oh." Marlie said, deflated. "Is he, you know, open to a little persuasion to change the mark at all?"

"No." yawned Deanna. "That was the first thing he said to me. Honestly, it's as if I only ever go and see him when I want something."

"You do, don't you?" Luella pointed out.

"No. Not always. Not all the time, anyway." Deanna squirmed under Luella's knowing gaze which, with or without Glamoury, had a way of encouraging truthfulness in the recipient. Preferring not to have to end up confessing every wrong thing she'd ever done, Deanna decided to change the subject.

"So, Rianne. How did you know he'd be marking those essays anyway?"

"Easy, really." smiled Rianne. "We're meant to be getting them given back to us tomorrow. Working on the premise that he won't want to mark Fred and George's essays any earlier than he has to, he'll have left them until the last minute. I.e., today."

"That's amazing." Marlie turned to Luella, impressed. "You never told me she had Second Sight too."

"It wasn't the Sight," Rianne told her. "Just a little elementary logic. Don't believe there's any such thing as the Sight, myself. All the Divination systems seem to work more on psychological manipulation than any actual psychic talent, and how often do you get people making genuine prophecies about the future?"

"There's the Redemption Prophecy," threw in Deanna. "Not to mention loads of other ancient prophecies."

"Exactly. They're all ancient prophecies. You never get any modern ones, do you? It's always an ancient prophecy attributed to some notable ancestor that's been passed down through the family line for centuries, never one that your Auntie Nell came up with at the last family reunion. You know, I wouldn't be at all surprised if they were all the product of a young Muggle with an overactive imagination and way too much time on her hands."

"Fortunately for my bank balance, it'll never be proved one way or the other. Now, talking of Divination, I've got those chart interpretations that Trelawney wanted to get on with." And with that, as Deanna pulled out her books, charts and various bits of paper, the conversation came to an end.

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As Rianne had so observantly noted, the following day was indeed what the Slyths had come to refer to affectionately as "Potions Day", a day noted for being an opportunity to get lots of points for very little in the way of effort, lord it over the other houses and generally get their egos stroked. Small wonder that most Slytherins named it as one of their favourite subjects.

Most of them wouldn't have been at all surprised, albeit highly gratified, to know that Professor Snape privately referred to those days when he had to teach Slytherins as "Slytherin Days". These, to him, were a chance to interact with his favourite students, enjoy the sensation of having students around who actually appreciated both him and his subject, and generally exploit the presence of a favourable audience by showing off for their benefit while taking certain other less respectful students down a peg or two in the process. And the Slytherin Days on which he taught Deanna Tyler's year were the ones he looked forward to most, the Weasley twins' presence notwithstanding.

Not today. Deanna's news the previous day had left him far too disturbed to enjoy the feeling of teaching his favourite Slytherins. Normally, he looked forward to seeing Luella Martin. Normally. Not, however, when she walked into his classroom as she had done today, head dropped, shoulders hunched, glancing around like a small, hunted animal, trailing behind her friends instead of joining in the conversation. While she didn't look depressed exactly, there was a nervous energy about her, a certain jumpiness that made it look as if she were about to take flight at any minute. Fearful. That just about summed her up. While a lot of Muggle-borns were looking worried right now, none of them looked quite like Luella did. Theirs was the anxiety of uncertainty. Luella's feelings bore a far closer resemblance to the fear born of knowledge. Knowledge of what exactly, he didn't know. But he owed it to both Deanna and Luella to find out.

The lesson passed surprisingly quietly. Severus was too concerned about Luella to bother picking on the Gryffindors. So uncharacteristically non-vindictive was he that Angelina Johnson leaned across the aisle to give George Weasley a nudge.

"What's up?" murmured George. Distracted as Snape seemed to be today, he didn't want to push his luck.

"Is he all right?" Angelina whispered, indicating Snape with a nod of the head. "He's not been really nasty to us once yet. And we've only lost two points so far, and that was because Fred made that rude remark about Glorious Stinkhorns."

"I know, it's disturbing." George agreed. "We're usually at least ten points down by now. The Slyths aren't doing too well either - Rianne's answered all his questions right and not a single point for her trouble. She doesn't look happy, does she?"

Angelina glanced at the Slytherin. While it would have been too much to say she was angry at Snape, she definitely wasn't giving him her usual attention, and she was slicing up her newts' tails with rather more vehemence than was strictly necessary. Marlie, normally oblivious to all but the most direct aggression, was backing away

from her nervously, a move which, Angelina noticed with more than a twinge of irritation, had the side-effect of bringing her that bit nearer to Fred. What does he see in her? she thought to herself. Honestly, men, show them a pretty face and a bit of blonde hair and they're gone. While she'd never had Fred down as the deep and meaningful type, she'd thought he'd had a little more discrimination than that.

George guessed what was on her mind. After all, it wasn't the first time he'd seen her glare at Marlie Lovegood like that. "Ange, leave it. They're not even talking at the moment. Fred said something he shouldn't have about Slytherins."

"He's got some sense, then." muttered Angelina darkly, returning to her work.

The lesson came to an end, and Severus dismissed them. He waited patiently for everyone to file out, then seized his chance as Luella, last in line, passed his desk.

"Miss Martin. A word."

The young Slytherin nearly jumped out of her skin with fright. Severus nodded grimly as his suspicions were confirmed. Guilty.

"What is it, sir?" she asked, her voice trembling. Yes, definitely guilty. Guilty and afraid. Still at least there was one good thing about it. If she'd been deliberately planning the attacks, she'd have been rather more adept at dealing with suspicion. Luella's reaction was more that of someone involved in something she didn't even begin to understand.

"Step into my office for a moment. We need to talk."

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Luella followed him in. Such a contrast to last time. Last time she'd been too concerned about him to worry about anything else. Now she felt like she'd been condemned.

He knows. He can't know. How can he know? But he does. Such were the thoughts running around Luella's mind as she took a seat. She took the opportunity to touch her arm again while his back was turned. Her nerves eased at once. You are an Heir of Slytherin, she could hear this voice telling her. What have you to be afraid of?

She let her fingers fall back into her lap as he turned and took a seat opposite her. The nervousness began to creep back. Heir of Slytherin she might be, but she was still only a fourteen year old girl faced with a teacher who clearly suspected all was not well and who was incredibly good at unearthing secrets.

He was studying her carefully, those cold black eyes showing no emotion other than a calm curiosity. For some reason, this frightened her more than if he'd been angry.

"Sir?" she asked. Might as well let him start things off - she certainly didn't intend to give away anything more than she had to.

"I just wanted to know how you've been feeling lately." he answered.

Luella could have burst out laughing. Now that was a question he was certainly better off not knowing the answer to. Best to feign ignorance.

"Oh." A pause. "Why?"

"Because you've not been yourself just recently, have you? Quite a few people have been commenting on it, you know. The general consensus is that you look terrified."

"Terrified? Me? No, I'm fine." Luella tried to smile, silently urging her Glamoury powers to kick in and make her look calm. Unfortunately for her, Glamoury didn't really work that well when the practitioner was under stress, as Caitlin had told her many times before now. Which explained why her Potions master was looking extremely dubious.

"You don't look fine. In fact, you look worried. Very worried. One might almost say anxious. For which I don't altogether blame you." The expression in his eyes had shifted to one of concern. "After all, Muggle-borns are the targets here. Understandable that you might be concerned for your own safety."

Luella clutched at this straw of hope. "Well, it is a bit worrying. I mean, even though I'm Slytherin, no one knows who the next target could be. Deanna's not letting me wander around on my own anymore."

Smart move, thought Severus. Not only does it lessen the risk of attack, it also gives Luella a steady supply of alibis. Deanna, you truly are a marvel. However, his other suspicions were not entirely allayed.

"A wise decision. Now is not a good time for the Slytherin Redeemer to go wandering around alone and unprotected. You do of course realise that you yourself are an Heir of Slytherin."

He watched Luella freeze, her already pale face going ever paler.

"It's not me." she said, just a little too quickly. "I'm not behind the attacks. I don't know what's causing them and I certainly don't know how to Petrify people."

"I didn't say it was you. I'm sure it's not. However, you're tied into the Chamber of Secrets legend whether you like it or not. And if the Chamber really is being opened, then we may need your help to sort things out. Which is why if anything strange or unusual, stranger and more unusual than normal anyway, is happening to you as a result of all this, then I need to know. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded, too terrified to speak.

"Good. All right, you can go. But remember, if anything unusual happens, anything at all..."

"I'll let you know." said Luella.

"Thank you. Good day. Close the door on your way out."

Luella left without another word. Close. So close. He was on to her now, no mistaking it. She just hoped that there wouldn't be another attack. Bad enough having to wear long sleeves the whole time and make sure no one caught her in the bath. Even worse if Professor Snape found out that a Dark Mark had appeared on her arm.

She'd never seen one, of course. All she knew about it was that there was a snake in it somewhere and that the Death Eaters had worn it on their arms. She'd seen it referred to way back in her first year, going through old Daily Prophets with Marlie. No pictures - evidently printing a picture of the Dark Mark was like saying the name in full - something not done by most good mages. It was a symbol of purest evil. And now she was wearing one.

Luella blinked back her tears as she hurried back to the common room. There was no way she could tell him, or anyone, about this. They'd turn from her immediately. Just picturing the look of disgust and hatred on Snape's face if he ever saw it made her feel ill. No, she could never tell him.

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Severus waited until Luella had gone before turning to a large cupboard in the corner of the room and magically unlocking it. The door fell open and Melissa Lovegood, dressed in navy blue robes and Armani glasses, her short blonde hair tucked impatiently behind her ears, staggered out, blinking in the firelight. Severus watched as she leaned against his desk for support, struggling to regain her bearings. Strange to think she was related to Marlene Lovegood and Narcissa Malfoy. They were both long-haired, glamourously turned out prima donnas, while Melissa, always the quiet, studious one, was the complete opposite. Not that that was a bad thing, Severus told himself.

"So, what do you think of that, Mel? Is our Redeemer hiding something?"

"She's a teenage Slytherin, Severus, of course she is. They're all up to something or other that they'd rather we didn't know about." Melissa, having regained her sense of balance, was now sitting down looking rather exasperated. "For example, my daughter is in the habit of inviting her cousin over to our house during the holidays while I'm at work. She still thinks I don't know. As far as I can gather, they spend most of their time listening to CDs, watching videos, and occasionally going into Exeter to buy lots of Muggle clothes, see the latest films and generally introduce Draco Malfoy to Muggle culture. I would say something to her, but he's not really a bad kid, he is family after all, it'll probably do him good to be converted over to the joys of Muggle life, and to be honest, I feel rather sorry for the boy."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for him? Mel, I thought you hated the family."

"Exactly. He can't have had an easy childhood. I think it'll do him good to have somewhere to go where he can just be himself for once. Leonard likes him. Reckons he's a very polite, charming boy."

"Draco Malfoy? Polite? And charming? To a Muggle?" Severus could hardly believe his ears.

"I know!" laughed Melissa. "I didn't believe it myself at first, but apparently he was fascinated by some of Leonard's work projects. Leonard ended up explaining how hydroelectric dams worked and Draco loved it."

"Maybe he was faking it." suggested Severus.

Melissa shook her head. "Leonard says he was genuine. Reckons he can tell when someone's just pretending to be interested. His exact words were 'I've had plenty of practice with you, Mel.' Uncalled for, if you ask me..."

"Somehow I don't think so. But never mind Mr. Malfoy. Back to Luella. What do you think's going on there?"

Melissa shook her head. "I have no idea. She's definitely hiding something. And yet I don't think she's causing the attacks. I don't think she's knows what's going on herself. But she knows something's happening to her. Poor child, she did look terrified. I think she's caught up in something completely out of her control and doesn't know what to do."

"She's not the only one." said Severus, patience beginning to run out. "Mel, I had in fact worked that out for myself. I was kind of hoping you could shed some light on things."

"You're the one on the scene, Severus! You're meant to be watching her, day in, day out. Have you no leads whatsoever? Haven't her friends noticed anything unusual?"

"Nothing. The only lead I've got is that Deanna and Rianne both noticed something up with her arm, but I checked it myself and there was nothing there."

"Her arm?" Melissa sat bolt upright. "Severus, she touched her arm as she came in, while your back was turned. Deliberately, and there was a noticeable gain in confidence afterwards. Not a large amount by any means, but it was there!"

"Then it is important. But Mel, she doesn't have a Dark Mark, that I do know!"

"You checked her left arm." Melissa's voice sounded neutral, but the look on her face was anything but. "But did you think to look at her right?"

"Her right arm?" The Knut dropped. "Oh for gods' sake. Why on earth didn't I think of that?" Severus slapped his forehead in disbelief at his own shortsightedness. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"How indeed. And you've lost your chance to have a look now, haven't you?" Melissa was not impressed. "To save any more elementary errors losing us time, I'll tell you it was her upper right arm. Now, keep watching her. And if another attack happens, don't lose any time. Get her into your office immediately and don't let her leave until you've had a full explanation and a look at that arm."

"Yes, Mel." Had any of his students heard him talking to anyone that meekly, he'd never have been able to control a class again.

"Good. Now, I'd say we were done here, wouldn't you? I'm off back to the DDAE - you know where to find me." She headed for the fire, reaching for her Floo powder. However, something made her turn back to him.

"Severus, I know it's kind of early, but what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going to spend it all alone with a big bottle of brandy, or are you going to break with tradition and actually let your hair down at my place for a change? No Weasleys, I promise. They're off to Egypt, the ones that aren't staying here."

"Ah, now, Mel, you know I'm not one for parties." protested Severus. "It's all so undignified. No, you youngsters have fun without me."

"You old misery, you. Anyway, who are you calling a youngster?" Melissa pretended to look offended. "I'm a full two months older than you and don't you forget it. Come on, Severus, you're one of my oldest friends if not the oldest. I've known you ever since we were kids. Is it too much to ask for you to come and enjoy my hospitality once a year?"

Severus ignored the pouting, instead cutting straight to the point. "Is Caitlin going?"

Melissa's levity disappeared. "She always goes, Severus."

"Then I'm staying right here."

Melissa sighed, hands on her hips. Much as she liked Severus, his infuriating obstinacy never ceased to drive her up the wall.

"Severus, how long are you going to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?"

"This refusal to have Caitlin Tyler anywhere near you."

Severus turned to face her, gleaming with what could have been coldness or pain.

"Until seeing her stops making me want to kill myself."

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Luella's instinctive action on reaching the Serpents' Nest was to head straight back to the dorm and stay there. However, she didn't get the chance.

Rianne pulled her aside as soon as she entered the room.

"Well? What did Snape want? And did it have anything to do with why he was in such a weird mood? I'm not happy with the points tally. Not happy at all. I'll never make my sweepstake total now." For some time now, Deanna and Marlie had been

running a Potions Points Sweepstake, based on how many points Snape gave out to Slytherin or took from Gryffindor during Potions each week. It had proved both popular and lucrative, and now virtually the entire house placed a few Sickles on it, some more often than others. Rianne didn't participate that often, but when she did, she frequently won. Which probably went a long way towards explaining her current mood.

"Don't know. It was weird. Just wanted to know how everything had been affecting me lately and if I was OK. And if anything out of the ordinary happened, I was to tell him." Lying to Snape was one thing, lying to Rianne was quite another. Besides, she already knew far too much. No point, really.

"And what did you tell him?"

"Just said I was fine, that I had been a bit worried I might be next, but that Deanna was looking out for me."

"You didn't tell him about your arm then."

Luella squirmed on the spot. "Er..."

"You didn't, did you." Rianne threw her hands in the air in exasperation. "Honestly, Lu, why the hell are you being so secretive about this? I mean, apart from being a teenage Slytherin of course. Lu, it's clearly bound up with the attacks, you're obviously in way over your head, go and tell him! Stop being such a prat about this. What could be so bad you can't talk to anyone about it?"

Luella shook her head. "You don't want to know. Trust me. You really don't want to know."

Rianne sighed. Well, she'd tried. She couldn't force Luella to talk after all. Maybe it would all sort itself out anyway. She hoped so anyway.

They were distracted by Deanna calling them over to a nearby table. It was one of Marlie's finds, a sheet of glass on top of a solid brass dolphin statue, currently covered with a black velvet tablecloth and copious Unbreakable Charms. Luella remembered Marlie buying it. They'd found it in a little alternative furniture shop in Richmond called Pure Life, along with enough fibre-optic lights, fake tigerskin throws, posters and plasma globes to keep Britain's entire student population going for the next five years. She'd had to step in when Marlie tried to pay for it, as the table cost two hundred quid and the shopkeeper was understandably suspicious of a fourteen year old who had that much cash on them. He'd been even more suspicious when Marlie tried to explain that she'd earned it from a totally legitimate electrical goods business venture. In the end, Luella had stepped in and smoothed things over. It was far too cool a piece of furniture to miss out on.

Marlie herself was currently seated at this table, teaching Ginny, Lydia and Autumn the rudiments of Jenga. The game was at an advanced stage by now, and the whole edifice looked as if it was about to collapse.

Luella and Rianne sat down next to Deanna, who was watching the game intently.

"Well? How's it going?" Rianne asked.

"It's getting very tense at the moment." Deanna told her. "There's only about three blocks left that you can get at easily now, and Lydia's going for one of them now." She held her breath as Lydia slowly teased one of the blocks out and placed it ever so delicately on top. Everyone let their breath out as the tower held.

"So, who do you think's going to lose then?" asked Deanna. "My money's on Marls."

"Bet you a Galleon it's Ginny." said Rianne, wasting no time.

"You're on." Deanna grinned.

"You're gambling an awful lot lately, Ri." commented Luella.

Rianne shrugged. "Got to make a living somehow, haven't I? My father's salary doesn't really go that far, even now he's head of the department. I don't have a huge inheritance, affluent parents or a thriving trade in converted Muggle goods to support me, do I?"

"Yeah, but surely there are safer means of getting some extra cash?"

"Safer, yes. But a lot less interesting." Rianne looked up as the tower came crashing down, leaving a blushing Ginny holding a block in her hand. "A Galleon please, Tyler."

Deanna paid up, muttering. Marlie, noticing that Luella and Rianne had arrived, told the three first years that they could carry on without her if they liked and turned to greet her friends.

"Well, hello there you guys! Couldn't resist the allure of the falling blocks, eh? Oops, sorry Ri. I know it's still a sore point."

Rianne was unmoved. "Nice try, Marls. I keep telling you, I'm over it. No amount of blocks references will make me start craving the game now. Nor will humming the theme tune over and over again, so you might as well stop that too before Deanna throttles you."

"Yes, if you could cut that out, Marls. It's driving me nuts, never mind Ri."

"Bloody hell, Ri." said Marlie, dejected. "You're meant to be an addict. What's wrong with you? The hallucinations should have well and truly set in by now, and the paranoid delusions should just be starting up."

Rianne got up. "To put it bluntly, Marls, I got a life. I recommend you do too. Better make the most of the last bits of spare time you'll have before you have to do my DADA homework for me. Come on, Lu." She headed for the dorm, Luella in tow. Marlie turned to Deanna.

"This is bad. Very bad. What the hell am I going to do? She's not bothered at all! I don't want to have to do her homework for her! What the hell do I do?"

Deanna recalled Sunday morning's conversation. Producing a quill, she whistled Nestra over.

"Hold on, Marls. I've got an idea..."

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"Now, are you sure this is going to work?" Marlie asked Deanna. A few days had passed and Nestra had by now returned.

"Almost certain of it, Marls." Deanna reassured her, passing the small parcel that Nestra had brought to her. Marlie ripped it open. There, wrapped in a note from her father wryly commenting that his life wouldn't be nearly so interesting without his daughter's crazy schemes to keep him occupied, was the small grey object that Deanna had suggested retrieving. Marlie's Tetris cartridge.

"Yeah, baby." whispered Marlie, her eyes lighting up. "Oh, Tyler, you are a genius. She'll never be able to resist the allure now it's actually here again!"

"Of course not." Deanna smiled. "Anyone can pretend something's not important to them when it's at the other end of the country. But when they have to see it all day, every day? She'll be hooked again by the end of next week."

Marlie squealed with joy. "Fantastic! Victory, here I come! Ah, Ri, you'd better start brushing up on your flying skills!"

Deanna glanced over to the other side of the common room, where Luella and Rianne were going over their Herbology homework together. "Come, let's get to the dorm. Start setting things up."

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So it was that when Rianne returned to the dorm to pick up some more parchment and another ink bottle, she found it empty. How odd. She could have sworn she saw Marlie and Deanna head up here. No sign of either of them though. How very strange.

She collected the things she'd come in search of and turned to leave. However, as she did so, she noticed the small grey object lying on the table, its familiar blue and purple label drawing her attention irresistibly. She picked it up and examined it, curious as to how it had got here when it was meant to be far away at the Lovegood's. It did not take long for her to guess at the truth.

"Well, well, well. Could you not live without it either, Marls? Dear oh dear. You are such a little hypocrite, you know."

"Hypocrite??" Marlie muttered furiously from her hiding place under Deanna's bed. Next to her, Deanna nudged her in the ribs.

"Ssh. She'll hear us!"

Smiling to herself, Rianne replaced the cartridge. "Yes, I see your game, Marlie Lovegood. Did you think that confronted with it, I'd crack under the pressure and give in? Please." She turned round, eyes idly scanning the room. "I suppose the two of you are hiding under one of the beds. Deanna's, probably - there's no room under Marlie's bed what with all the designs, a Cleansweep Seven and all those spare parts. Not really a very original hiding place, I must say. Let's hope you two never have to take cover when a horde of Death Eaters storms your house." A smug shake of the head and a rather superior laugh. "Never mind, eh. Better luck next time, you two. Be seeing you." She sauntered out, the cartridge lying on the table where she'd left it. Marlie and Deanna lost no time in extricating themselves.

"You said it would work!" Marlie yelled at her friend.

"I thought it would! I didn't know she'd be able to resist temptation did I?" Deanna shouted back.

"This can't be happening, it can't be!" moaned Marlie. "I can't possibly lose! I've never lost anything in my life, I can't start now!"

"Haven't you?"

Marlie shook her head. "No, not really. Even last year, I didn't lose exactly. I threw the crucial match away rescuing Harry, but that's not the same as losing. Oh gods, I'm going to be so humiliated!" She sunk onto her bed, head in her hands, bewailing her misfortune.

Try as she might, Deanna found it hard to gather much sympathy for her.

"Well, you will insist on starting these things, won't you? Honestly, you know what Rianne's like, she could match Snape in the self-control stakes. It's your own silly fault for challenging her in the first place."

"Thanks a lot, Tyler." snapped Marlie. She dried her eyes and picked up the cartridge. "Well, I shall just have to take more of an active role, shan't I? I will win this bet, if I have to put the thing on a fishing rod and dangle it in front of her everywhere she goes!"

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And that, more or less, was what Marlie did. Everywhere Rianne went, she found the Tetris cartridge before her eyes. Marlie would leave it lying in front of her during lessons, pester her with it during meals, play the game incessantly in the common room, stand behind her in corridors whispering "Tetris! Tetris! Tetris!" and cause it to levitate back and forwards between Rianne and her textbooks while she was trying to work.

To no avail. Luella's problems had caused Rianne to forget about Tetris entirely, and once having discovered that she could live without it, her natural Slytherin willpower

ensured that she could continue to do so, even in the face of all the temptation Marlie could throw at her.

Finally, November came to an end, and so did the bet. 1st December dawned, and Rianne was still very much Tetris-resistant, much to Marlie's chagrin.

"Well, Marlie, time's up!" grinned Rianne as she sauntered into breakfast. "It's December, and I think we all know what that means. The bet's over, it looks like I've survived with my sanity intact, and I'm here to claim my winnings."

Marlie was still in a state of shock. "I lost. I lost. I can't believe I lost. NOOOOO!!!!!" she howled.

Rianne patted her on the back, grin not fading for a minute. "That's right. You lost. I won. Get over it. And looking back on the terms of our agreement, calling Deanna and Lu as witnesses, I do believe that means I need never write another Gilderoy Lockhart DADA assignment again."

Marlie's spirits plummeted even lower. "Lovely. Just what I need. As if I don't have enough trouble getting my own work in."

"You always get Lockhart's in on time though, don't you, Marls?" Deanna grinned. "See it as another opportunity to sing his praises."

"Hey now, don't try and make her feel better about it!" snapped Rianne. "She's meant to be suffering."

"Hear that, Marlie?" Deanna said, nudging her in the side. "You get to suffer too. Look! Lots of posing, drama queening and generally milking it thrown in for nothing. You'll love it."

"Will I." Marlie looked far from convinced by this.

"Yeah, it'll be a laugh. Look, I'll give you a hand with some of them. See it as a golden opportunity for taking the mick. It'll be fun, seeing how far we can push things without him realising."

Marlie appeared even more depressed at this. "And if he notices? He'll hate me. He'll never ask me to help him answer his fan mail again."

Luella and Rianne both immediately began staring at their fingernails and biting their lips, anything to stop themselves bursting out laughing. While Deanna, eyes wide, drew in a deep breath and tried to stop her respect for Marlie taking a running jump out of the nearest window.

"You answer Lockhart's fan mail?"

"Oh yeah." nodded Marlie. "I'm often round there, giving him a hand addressing it all. He's always giving me advice on handling fame and telling me stories about his career."

We have a great time." Her eyes misted over as a dreamy blissed-out smile crossed her face.

Deanna fought back the urge to vomit. "Alright, alright, whatever. Marlie, you seem to have overlooked one salient fact in all this. It'll be Rianne's name appearing on the essays, not yours. Lockhart won't know it's you, and your little trysts will remain unaffected. You'll still be his favourite little groupie, although gods only know why you'd want to be."

The lights went back on inside Marlie's mind. "Yay! Brilliant! Cool! Thank you, Deanna!" Her face fell again. "Of course, I've still got to write the bloody things."

"I'm sure you'll cope. Hey, here's something that'll cheer you all up." It was now Deanna's turn to light up. Luella wondered what on earth she had to tell them. There weren't many subjects that Deanna allowed herself to get this enthusiastic about.

"I had a look on the common room noticeboard this morning and guess what's starting up next week?"

"Some extracurricular DADA tuition taught by someone who actually knows what they're talking about?" suggested Rianne.

"Nope. Better than that."

Rianne sat up, now really intrigued. "We're going to be allowed to take it in turns to give Lockhart a kick in his vulnerable bits?"

"Sadly not, but this is as good. There's a Duelling Club starting up!"

All three of them started taking an interest.

"A Duelling Club? Really?"

"When?"

"Who's teaching it?"

"One at a time! Next Tuesday, I think. In here at seven. Don't know who's teaching it though."

"Maybe it's McGonagall." suggested Rianne.

"Or Flitwick - I think he was a duelling champion once." mused Marlie.

"Do you think it'll be Snape?" asked Luella hopefully.

"I don't care as long as it's not Lockhart." said Deanna. "But just think, a proper duelling club! Won't that be cool!"

"Not that cool." Rianne pointed out. "This'll be proper duelling, with rules and things. Not the kind of dirty fighting you're into."

"Rianne, how many of our fellow Slytherins do you think will be attending this club?" asked Deanna patiently.

Rianne glanced up and down the table. Not far away, Lydia could be heard enthusing to Ginny and Autumn about how much fun duelling was and how her father had been a duelling champion once, while on the other side of them, Draco was bragging to Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy about how he was sure to be the best there and how his father had taught him to duel before he could walk.

Rianne turned back to her friends. "Most of them, I'd say."

"Exactly. Anyone who thinks it's going to be played by the proper Viscount Fox-Salisbury Rules has got a nasty shock coming to them. My mum reckons that if she ever catches any of her Auror trainees using the official duelling rules, she fails them automatically. Quickest way to lose a fight, she reckons." Deanna's usual self-assured pride was firmly in place once more, the way it always was when she spoke about her mother. Luella couldn't help smiling. Caitlin Tyler never could do anything wrong in her daughter's eyes. Rather like the way Draco always spoke about his father, although Deanna would have hit the roof if anyone had dared to compare them out loud.

"Blimey, Tyler, I wouldn't want to have to partner you." remarked Marlie. "I don't want to have to spend three months in the hospital wing again. But on the other hand, if it gets me out of doing Ri's work for her..."

"Hey, you stop trying to wriggle out of it!" Rianne demanded. "We had a deal, remember?"

Marlie immediately began whining again, and a full-scale argument began to ensue. However, when the dust had settled, all of them had decided that this Duelling Club would definitely be worth investigating.

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The week passed quickly, and Tuesday evening found the four of them heading for the Great Hall, all looking forward to learning how to duel. However, their enjoyment was marred by the presence of half the Slytherin second year behind them. Draco, with his usual modesty, was once again heard proclaiming his duelling prowess to anyone who'd listen.

"Of course, my father taught me to duel years and years ago. Don't really see the point of going myself,"

"Well go back to the Nest then." Deanna muttered.

"but it'll be fun to see everyone else get humiliated." continued Draco. "Not to mention showing everyone how duelling should be done."

Marlie tugged at Deanna's sleeve. "DT, is there any way you'd consider taking him on as a duelling partner? You could take him in a fight, I know you could."

"Nah, I think Malfoy senior might get a bit annoyed if I put his son in hospital." Deanna replied.

"This is a bad thing how?"

Deanna didn't get a chance to reply. Draco, bored of bragging to his crowd of sycophants, had turned his attention to Ginny and her friends, who were right behind him.

"So, Weasley, are any of your brothers going to this little gathering? I don't suppose they'll have had proper duelling tuition before. Your family's not really high enough on the social ladder to have time for things like that."

Ginny opened her mouth in shock, not sure how to react. It was Lydia who leapt to her defence.

"At least her family have done an honest day's work in their lives, Malfoy! What contribution have your lot ever made to the world?"

Autumn plucked at her friend's sleeve. "Lydia, he's a Malfoy, they're very rich and powerful, is this really a good idea?"

"If Deanna Tyler can get away with it, then so can I!" Lydia responded. "Well, Malfoy? Going to justify your pitiful existence to the rest of the world or not?"

Draco just raised an eyebrow, more amused than threatened. "What's this I see? A Vetinari sticking up for one of the Weasleys? Your line has gone soft in recent years, hasn't it? Must be that Gryffindor half-blood mother of yours."

Lydia glared at him but succeeded in keeping her temper. "Well, if we're comparing purity of blood here, then you're hardly one to talk. Isn't your mother a half-blood too?"

That stopped Draco in his tracks. "You leave my mother out of this." he said, his words laced with a venom that would have put a mantichora to shame. Drawing his wand, he advanced on the first year, who despite her brave words, began to look just a little worried.

Deanna, watching all this, drew her own wand. Her earlier intuition about Lydia had been spot on - it really was like watching her younger self in action. However, she'd never actively antagonised anyone older than herself yet. Not without back up around anyway. She turned to Marlie. "Marls, about challenging Draco. I think you may have been onto something."

Marlie, seeing Ginny watching events unfold with a look of absolute terror on her face, nodded once and drew her own wand, following Deanna into action. Rianne rolled her eyes and turned to Luella.

"Look at them. We haven't even reached the Great Hall yet and there's a fight brewing already. Better get your wand out, Lu, they may need reinforcements."

Luella doubted this very much, but drew her wand anyway. Someone had already got the first blow in.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Malfoy's wand was gone in a flash. He didn't even bother turning round.

"That you, Tyler? Should have known you'd be stepping in. Get a different tactic for once, will you?" he drawled, snapping his fingers for Crabbe and Goyle to join in.

"Already have." said Deanna smugly. "Wasn't me who Disarmed you."

Malfoy turned around. Two things caught his attention. One was Marlie idly twirling his wand around. The other was Crabbe and Goyle caught in a magical net and struggling to get out, not very successfully.

"Entrapment Charms. Very useful little things, you know." said Deanna as she prowled round the cursing bodies of Crabbe and Goyle. "Language, boys." she said mildly. "Yes, Entrapment Charms. Standard piece of Auror magic. Learnt it from my mother over the summer. Stop struggling, Goyle, it won't do you any good. See, Malfoy, you're not the only one whose parents have been training them up in advance." She gave a poisonous little smile that rivalled Marlie's best efforts any day before turning to the first years. "You lot OK?"

Autumn and Ginny nodded, both looking terrified. Lydia, on the other hand, had recovered her bravado virtually immediately.

"Yeah, we're fine. Of course, I could have handled it by myself." The snobbish air briefly resurfaced. "But thank you anyway." she added, not wanting to seem ungrateful. She nudged the net with her foot. "Nice charm work. My dad never teaches me any Auror magic."

"Probably scared you'll hex all your enemies into St. Mungo's." remarked Marlie. "My mum is."

"Whereas mine couldn't give a damn and would probably be quite proud of me if I did." commented Deanna. "Now, what do I do about you boys? How to release you without getting hexed as soon as my back is turned. Hmm."

Her musings were broken by an urgent hiss from Rianne. "Tyler! Snape!"

The net was gone in an instant, and Draco found his wand thrown back to him with unseemly haste. Crabbe and Goyle struggled to their feet just as Snape rounded the corner.

"Greetings, students."

No one answered. Snape's usual languid gaze took in each one of them in turn, his teacher instincts telling him that someone had almost certainly been in breach of school rules here... but who? Who looked guilty? All of them, which didn't get him very far.

"Having some kind of party, are we? What's the occasion? Someone's birthday, is it? Yours perhaps, Miss Weasley?" He seized on the nearest Slytherin to him. Also, there was something different about her. She looked even more fearful than the rest of them.

"No. Mine." Marlie leapt in instinctively. Defending Ginny was rapidly becoming second nature to her these days. "I turned fifteen last week," (well, that much was true anyway), "and I was just asking my cousin why he didn't get me a card." She turned on her best smile. It had never worked on Snape yet, but there was no harm in trying.

"I see. Well, important as it may be to you, Miss Lovegood, there are more important concerns in the world at large, and your little entourage is blocking the corridor. Unless you all have places to be, might I suggest you adjourn to your common room? That is the intended venue for socialising after all."

"We're going to the Duelling Club, sir!" said Deanna, deciding that a change of subject was what was called for here.

Snape's lip curled into a sneer. "Are you now. How interesting. I am going that way myself - I've been asked to provide a little assistance in conducting it. I did wonder if I might see you there."

"No one beats me at duelling. No one." Deanna had turned serious. "I've got a reputation to uphold."

"Well, let us hope tonight only serves to enhance it." returned Snape, a strange little smile playing around his lips. "Now, children, if you'd like to get a move on? We wouldn't want to be late, would we now?" He ushered them all on their way. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle muttered to themselves and cast dark looks at Deanna, but with Snape watching them, there was very little they could do. Deanna appeared not to notice the looks they were giving her. However, Rianne did, and the murderous looks in their eyes struck fear into her heart. She recalled their first year, in which Deanna had been responsible for getting Crabbe and Goyle's older siblings expelled. Well, Deanna herself seemed fairly secure. She shot another glance back at the second years. Draco was saying something to Crabbe and Goyle, before all three of them turned to look at an oblivious Luella. This time, Rianne really did feel her blood run cold. Yes, Deanna was in all probability safe from harm. But she'd never feared so much for Luella...

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They entered to find the Great Hall packed. Obviously learning how to duel was quite a popular option given recent events, although as Deanna kept on reminding them all, the official duelling rules were one of the quickest ways to lose a fight in existence.

Severus had seen his charges into the hall before waiting outside to catch any stragglers and meet up with the staff member who'd somehow managed to talk him into this. Actually, he reflected, that wasn't strictly true. He'd volunteered freely enough, after all.

"You're starting what?" he'd asked in derision. "A Duelling Club?"

"That's right, Severus!" Lockhart had beamed. "After all, what with all these attacks that have been going on lately, we can't be too careful, can we? Students need to know how to protect themselves."

"And you're going to teach them, are you?" Severus had said, trying to picture the results if all the students adopted Lockhart's standard techniques of defence. Then wishing he hadn't.

"Well, obviously. No one knows more about duelling than I do! I see it as a moral duty to impart my knowledge to the younger generation. I'd be letting them all down rather badly if I failed to teach them how to defend themselves and then they ended up in grave danger as a result, wouldn't I now?"

Severus privately thought that the risks of a student coming to any great harm could only be increased by a duelling session with Lockhart, but decided not to say anything out loud.

"Do you really think the students will be interested in a Duelling Club, Gilderoy?" After all, to paraphrase the man himself, he'd be failing in his moral duty to just about everyone if he didn't at least try and talk Lockhart out of it.

"Oh yes. I think there's quite a bit of demand for it. That young Miss Tyler, for example, I gather she's quite the dueller wannabe. I'm sure she could benefit from some extended tuition in the subject."

Severus's detached air of amusement evaporated instantly. For some reason, the thought of Lockhart anywhere near Deanna did that to him.

"You're thinking of teaching Deanna Tyler how to duel?" He could hardly believe that anyone, even Lockhart, could possibly think that Deanna needed any encouragement to start and win fights. He couldn't even begin to remember how often she'd got in trouble for fighting in the corridor. Far too often, that much he did know.

"Oh yes. She's got a lot of potential, if she can just get her confidence up. That's her trouble, no self-belief at all."

Severus idly wondered if Lockhart had actually met Deanna Tyler at all. He wouldn't put it past her to have produced some kind of clone to attend Lockhart's classes for her. He made a mental note to ask her, find out her secret. After all, having a clone to attend staff meetings on his behalf sounded like quite a useful thing to have.

"Sounds like quite a challenge. Are you sure you'll be alright on your own?"

"Well, I believe so, Severus. Why?"

"Just that if Deanna is to receive the best in tuition from you, then she's going to need your full attention. And you can hardly give her that with anything up to two hundred students there as well."

Lockhart's smile began to fade. "I suppose that is true, Severus. I can't teach them all at once. I hadn't quite thought that far ahead."

Severus resisted the urge to snap back a sarcastic comment. Now, now, Severus. You have him right where you want him. Charm and diplomacy is what is needed here.

"Well, I do have one idea... but you probably won't be interested."

Lockhart seized on the bait at once. "No, no, Severus, tell me. I'd love to hear it!"

"Are you sure? I mean, you'll probably hate it." demurred Severus.

"No, no, I'm always open to suggestions. You know me, Severus."

Several suggestions as to what Lockhart could do sprang to mind - however, he restrained himself. Must not blow it now, he told himself.

"Well, alright then. I've done a little duelling myself before now, why don't I give you a hand? I could supervise the rest of them while you go one on one with Miss Tyler. What do you say, Gilderoy?" The accompanying smile would not have fooled anyone other than Lockhart. Fortunately, fooling Lockhart was not tricky if you were as skilled a manipulator as Severus (or for that matter, even if you weren't).

Lockhart clapped his hands with joy. "Severus, that's wonderful! Would you? Would you really? Oh, but I couldn't possibly ask you. I couldn't possibly make that kind of demand on your time."

"No trouble, Gilderoy." murmured Severus. "I'm sure we can arrange a mutually convenient evening. After all, even experienced professionals like myself could stand to learn from you, Gilderoy." Severus wasn't sure whether or not he'd overdone the smarm there. However, he relaxed when he remembered he was talking to Lockhart - it wasn't possible to overdo it.

"Ah, thank you, Severus!" Lockhart beamed, slapping him on the back. "I knew I could rely on you! You and me, we make a great team, don't we?"

"We certainly do, Gilderoy." Severus had responded, trying not to burst out laughing. "We certainly do."

And now it was the night of the Duelling Club, and Severus was standing outside the Great Hall waiting for Lockhart to show up. He checked his rather battered watch, old but still just about ticking. Late. Well, wasn't that Lockhart to a tee? He glanced around, looking for him. Hurry up, Gilderoy, he thought. I don't have all night.

Fortunately, Lockhart chose that moment to put in an appearance. Severus resisted the urge to vomit. Purple robes. Bright purple robes. With a rather gaudy golden trim. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Hideous. However, he was still Slytherin enough to pretend to be pleased to see him.

"Ah, Gilderoy. Glad you could make it. The Hall's packed, I think we'll have quite an audience."

"Excellent, excellent!" Lockhart peered through the slightly open door. "Is Miss Tyler there?"

"In the very front row. I spoke to her earlier, she's really looking forward to it. Of course, she doesn't know you're going to be giving her your full attention tonight, but I'm sure she'll be thrilled when she finds out. Ecstatic in fact." Severus tried not to grin too hard at this. Deanna's reaction would certainly be interesting, that was certain. And while they were on the subject of Deanna...

"Tell me, Gilderoy. Did you ever hear from her mother?"

Lockhart sighed, his face falling. "Alas, she turned me down. She was very apologetic, said she regretted having to hurt my feelings, but her affections were engaged elsewhere. She told me the story, it's quite heartrending actually."

"Heartrending? Tell me more." Severus could hardly wait to hear what kind of sob-story Caitlin had concocted this time.

"It seems she's in love with this wealthy Muggle. However, she's unable to marry him because he's a member of some Rome-based religious sect that forbids divorce, and he's already married. She tells me his wife went mad about seven or eight years ago and is now a patient in an exclusive clinic in Switzerland, unable to recognise even her own family now. Of course there's not much left of the marriage anymore, but on the other hand, this chap is forbidden to divorce and won't anyway as there's no one else who'll pay her medical bills. So there's poor Caitlin caught up in all this, unable to marry him, but not wanting anyone else. The poor, poor woman, it's all so sad!" Lockhart produced an enormous purple handkerchief and began to dab at his eyes.

"Too bad." murmured Severus, trying his hardest not to burst out laughing. Caitlin, he thought, you are an absolute genius! He wondered how long it had taken her to come up with that little story, and if Mel had been involved. Well, the answer to the second question was obvious. Of course she had, the whole thing had Mel Lovegood stamped all over it.

Lockhart recovered himself. "Ah well, maybe Caitlin Tyler's not my type after all. Does she still hang around with Melissa Harker, do you know?"

Once again, Severus had to fight for self-control. "Out of luck again I'm afraid, Gilderoy. She's been married for nearly twenty years. I should know, I was at the wedding. Now shall we proceed? We don't want to keep our charges waiting for too long, do we?" He indicated the doorway. Lockhart, once again beaming, thanked him profusely and went in.

The entire hall fell silent as they walked up on stage. No surprises there - Lockhart had that effect on people. Severus guessed that most people couldn't believe that an apparently heterosexual male would wear anything like that. He glanced around at the crowd of upturned faces. Every emotion from disappointment to disgust was visible, and the most disgusted face of all was that of Deanna Tyler. Turning away from Lockhart, she caught his eye and gave him a look of sympathy. Severus gave a conspiratorial smile back. After all, it was for her sake that he was doing this. He remembered talking to her on the first full day of term, and her recounting how Lockhart had humiliated her in front of the entire class. Well now, my daughter, he thought, here is the hour of your revenge. I may not be able to be a proper father to you, but this much I can do for you.

Lockhart was giving the crowd his usual spiel. Severus, his mind falling back into its usual habit of ignoring whatever Lockhart was saying, was only pulled back to reality by the mention of his own name.

"He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about duelling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a little demonstration before we begin."

"Hold on, Gilderoy." Severus interrupted, seeing an ideal opportunity to put his plan into action. "Weren't you saying earlier how certain individuals could benefit from a little one to one tuition?"

Confusion spread across the hall as students turned to one another, wondering what on earth he was talking about. Severus caught Deanna's eyes again and smiled at her. She didn't look confused, but she was smiling a little herself, as if trying to guess what he was up to now.

"Was I, Severus?" Lockhart looked more than a little perplexed himself.

"Why, of course. Why else did you accept my offer of assistance?" He turned to the audience, and singled out Deanna again. She stopped smiling at once. "Miss Tyler, could you come up here please? Bring your wand."

Deanna got up, shaking, and walked slowly, very slowly, on to the stage. Marlie was staring after her with a look of something which, if he hadn't known better, he could have sworn was envy, while the rest of the Slytherins were cheering her, shouting "Go on, Tyler, show him what you're made of!" In fact, quite a few Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were cheering too, and there wasn't a student anywhere who wasn't beginning to grin. Deanna's reputation as someone who needed no lessons in these things was known to just about everyone, and it had not been played down in the telling.

Deanna walked straight over to him, her eyes a mixture of curiosity and sheer fury that she'd been dragged up in front of the entire school like this.

"Trust me, Deanna." he whispered to her. "I know what I'm doing." He turned back to Lockhart. "Well now, Gilderoy, didn't you say she could do with a little expert advice

from yours truly? I think this could be a golden opportunity. Why don't you talk her through the opening formalities and engage her in a mock battle? This way, the entire school gets to see you in action and benefit from your wisdom. What do you say, Gilderoy?"

Deanna caught on immediately. A slow smile began to creep across her face as she took her wand firmly in hand. Lockhart didn't appear to notice anything odd, as he was his usual cheerful self.

"Why, Severus, that's a wonderful idea! Now, don't worry, Miss Tyler, I won't hurt you. You can do all the attacking, I'll just demonstrate how to block."

The grin on Deanna's face grew even wider. Really, thought Severus as he stepped out of the way, this is far too easy. He's just walking right into it!

"Now, Miss Tyler, we face each other like so, yes, that's right. And then we bow, like this." He gave an elaborate bow with much twirling of his arms. Deanna merely nodded briefly. Severus couldn't help feeling proud. Already one up on Lockhart.

"Then we hold our wands, like so, bring them back over our heads in the accepted fashion, that's right, and on the count of three, we let fly with our spells. At least, you will. I will just show everyone how to block them. Now, I want you to come at me as hard as you can. Give it your best shot."

Deanna lowered her wand, a rather Caitlin-esque smile playing around her features. "Are you sure, sir? Do you really want my best shot? I mean, I wouldn't want to hurt you or anything."

Yes, go for it Deanna, that is absolutely perfect, thought Severus, barely able to contain himself. He glanced at the crowd, all of whom were clearly thinking much the same thing judging by the expectant grins on their faces.

Lockhart, not having a clue what he was letting himself in for, walked right into Deanna's trap.

"Don't you worry about that, my dear! I shall be quite alright. I want you to do your worst. In fact, I insist on it."

"Sure?" asked Deanna.

"Absolutely. Come on, let me have it!" Lockhart spread his arms dramatically.

Deanna sighed and raised her wand. "OK, sir. If you insist. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Lockhart chuckled. "Such fighting spirit. Now, we hold our wands like so, and on the count of three. One... two..."

He never got to three. Deanna generally fought according the Slytherin Code of Honour, and rule number one was never wait until the count finishes. Her first hex

sent him staggering back, completely off-balance, getting a roar of applause mixed with laughter. Severus, very wisely deciding that the best vantage point for this was away from the stage, walked down the steps and leaned against the far wall to watch the proceedings.

There was really no contest and only one possible result. However, Deanna, displaying a sense of timing and sheer sadism that could only have come from Caitlin, kept the fight going on for far longer than was justified, now hexing him, now stepping back and letting him recover before letting go with yet another blow. Occasionally, she'd even reverse the hexes she'd cast so as give him something approximating a sporting chance. Severus could only marvel at her skill, both the actual magic used and the way she played with him, prolonging the suffering for both her amusement and that of the audience that Severus had no doubt that Deanna was performing for. It had all worked out beautifully. Deanna couldn't have done better if she'd been working to a script. Severus sighed with happiness, every fibre of his being alive with a fierce paternal pride. That's my girl, he thought. That's my girl.

At length, he decided to call a halt to proceedings. He was beginning to feel rather sorry for the man. Sometimes, you just had to show mercy.

"Alright, Miss Tyler, I think that's enough for now." he said languidly, a light touch of his fingertips on her shoulder bringing her to a halt. "I think everyone's now got a pretty good idea of what to look for in a successful dueller. Are you alright there, Gilderoy?"

Lockhart was hauling himself to his feet, straightening his robes and hunting around for his hat. "Yes, yes, I'm quite alright, Severus. Thank you, Miss Tyler, that was, er, very well done, yes, very well done indeed. However, some of your moves were just a little too predictable, and you could do with a little practice on some of your hexing..." He seemed to notice the looks Deanna and Severus were giving him, because he instantly changed the subject. "Anyway, enough demonstrating! If you'd all like to get into pairs..."

Severus accompanied Deanna off the stage. She lost no time in bragging about her achievements.

"That was amazing! Were you watching, sir? Wasn't I good?" She was literally bouncing up and down with excitement, victory's sweet intoxication coursing through her veins.

"You were indeed. Caitlin could not have done better. I personally couldn't take my eyes off you. Ten points to Slytherin for one of the most entertaining evenings I've had in a long time." He stopped, turning to look straight into her eyes. "Well done, Deanna Tyler. I'm proud of you."

To his surprise, Deanna actually blushed and shuffled her feet, looking rather embarrassed. "Thank you!" she whispered shyly, before giving him another taste of that amazing smile that transfigured her face completely and running off to join the rest of the Slytherin fourth year, all of whom with the exception of Marlie Lovegood

were prostrating themselves before her chanting "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

Severus turned away with a smile. Teenagers today, they were so much more melodramatic than he ever remembered being. Still, at least one score had been settled, to just about everyone's satisfaction.

He looked up and noticed Draco Malfoy not far away. He was watching Deanna, looking rather impressed but trying to hide it. Then Goyle said something to him and his usual sneer was back. Draco turned his attention away from the still celebrating fourth years, his eyes falling on Harry Potter. The sneer changed to a look of absolute hatred. Severus recalled the first Quidditch match of the season with a grimace. Another Slytherin with a score to settle. With yet more manipulation in mind, he stalked over to Harry and Ron. Maybe it wouldn't just be Deanna who got one over an enemy tonight.

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"Stop it, you lot. You're embarrassing me." Deanna was still quivering after being told by Snape that he was proud of her, and all the adulation her classmates were giving her was proving just a little too much.

The Slytherin fourth year pulled itself to its collective feet. As soon as they'd done so, Deanna found herself having her back patted, hair ruffled and name chanted by virtually all of them.

"Way to go Tyler!" one of the boys yelled.

"That was amazing, Tyler." said Lucas, wiping a tear from his eye. "All term I've been hoping and praying, watching and waiting for someone, anyone to finally give Lockhart the kicking he's been crying out for since day one, and now it's finally happened! Tyler, that was brilliant. You are God."

"Yeah, Deanna, that was the best performance I've ever seen!" Rianne yelled in Deanna's ear. "You've just lived out my number one fantasy. Oh, I am so envious of you, you know!"

"It's true." Luella confirmed. "At one point, she was ready to storm the stage herself and give you a hand. It was all Lucas and I could do to stop her. I tell you what, she wasn't the only one either. I think you just lived out the fantasies of half the school."

"So I see." Deanna cast her eyes around the hall, watching all the students who were still looking at her. Several of them waved and shouted "Go Tyler!" at her when they saw her looking their way. Deanna acknowledged them with a short bow and a smile before turning back to her friends. "Man alive, this is going to be talked about for weeks! Fantastic! Hey, I'm on a roll now. So. Who wants to be my duelling partner then? Come on, I'll take you all on!" She began pacing around, brandishing her wand. "Come on, you big bunch of wusses, who's up for a fight?"

It was really quite strange how as soon as she'd said that, all the attention seemed to vanish. Rianne immediately grabbed Luella, loudly declaring "I'll duel with you, Lu." while the five boys also swiftly paired off. Geoff Foxworth, not to be left without a partner, grabbed hold of a nearby Hufflepuff who was looking a bit lost and dragged him off to start duelling.

Deanna's face fell and the euphoria melted. "Hey, where'd you all go? Bloody hell, you lot, you're such losers. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'll duel you, DT."

Deanna turned to see Marlie watching her. And she did not look happy. Deanna recalled that she'd been the one Slytherin who hadn't joined in the hero-worship. Obvious why.

"Aw, what's the matter, Marls." Deanna taunted her. "Upset that I whipped your precious Gilderoy into submission?"

"You could say that." Marlie produced her wand. "You totally humiliated him! In front of everyone! His reputation'll be shattered!"

"What reputation?"

Marlie's face was going redder by the second. "Oh, and now you have to insult him too! Honestly, Tyler, when do you ever stop?"

"When I'm bored." Deanna grinned. "So, you want revenge do you? OK then. Come and take it." She twirled her wand in a theatrical gesture and got ready for action. Marlie wasted no time on the formalities, but leapt straight into action.

Deanna realised too late that perhaps she'd been a bit hasty. This wasn't Lockhart. This wasn't even Malfoy. It certainly wasn't some over reckless Gryffindor looking to try their luck. This was Marlie Lovegood who had fought alongside her on occasions too numerous to count, whose duelling skills, although frequently overlooked by the rest of the school, weren't far off Deanna's own, and who, most importantly, knew all Deanna's favourite tactics. For the first time in her life, Deanna was facing an opponent who was pretty much her equal. And it showed.

Hex after hex came flying her way, and it was all Deanna could do to block them, never mind fight back. The curses she did manage to fling Marlie's way were deflected easily. It swiftly dawned on Deanna that perhaps this had been a mistake.

Finally, Deanna came to a decision. There was no way she was going to win a fight against Marlie using magical means. Dodging a particularly virulent version of the Jelly-Legs Curse, she did what she should have done in the first place; one Disarming Charm later and Marlie was wandless.

Marlie shrieked in fury, staring helplessly after her wand as it went flying into the distance. However, she was nothing if not resourceful. Before Deanna even had time

to draw breath, Marlie had launched herself at her, grabbing her by the wrist and wrestling her to the ground.

"That's cheating!" Deanna shouted at her.

"Yeah. Got a problem?" snarled Marlie as she snatched Deanna's wand out of her hand and sent it flying after her own.

"You little... Alright, Lovegood, you want a fight, you got one!" Deanna grabbed Marlie by the hair and with that, the fight began in earnest.

Sadly for them both, everyone else was just winding up their duels and dusting themselves down. Harry and Draco, who had ended up getting paired together, were the only other two still fighting, and even that was now being broken up by Snape. So it wasn't long before attention turned towards them.

"Miss Tyler." came Snape's voice. Neither girl heard him. He repeated himself, this time louder. Still no answer.

"DEANNA!" This time, they both heard him. Marlie, who had caught Deanna in a headlock, let go of her immediately. Both of them hauled themselves to their feet and began looking rather sheepish. Snape had that effect.

"When you've both quite finished making fools of yourselves." That menacing tone brought hostilities to an end at once. Marlie and Deanna both muttered "Sorry, sir." and hastily began straightening up each other's robes and brushing the dust off. Snape, satisfied that they were both suitably chastened, turned away. The two girls turned to each other, caught each other's eyes and stifled giggles.

"I think we both got a bit carried away there, didn't we?" murmured Deanna.

"Er, yeah, you could say that." grinned Marlie, having gone rather pink. "Fun though, wasn't it?"

"Oh yeah. You were good, you know."

Marlie tossed her hair with pride. "Of course. I learnt from the best, after all." She paused, seeing Deanna looking bewildered. "That's you, by the way."

"Oh. Right. I knew that."

Now that the duels had concluded, Lockhart was calling for a volunteer pair so he could demonstrate blocking spells.

"What, like the blocks you used so well against Deanna?" remarked Rianne, just loudly enough for most of them to hear. Lockhart didn't seem to hear her, although Rianne could have sworn she saw Snape's mouth twitch at the corners. He didn't say anything to her though. Instead, he stepped forward, picking out Draco and Harry.

The two boys face each other, the atmosphere between them alive with malevolence. Snape leaned forward and whispered something to Draco, who began smirking in a way that meant nothing but trouble.

Luella drew closer to Rianne. "Do you think they'll be alright?"

"Course they will. Snape wouldn't let any harm come to a student. Would he?" Luella could tell that Rianne wasn't entirely happy about this either.

"Not to Malfoy, no. But he hates Harry..."

Rianne's confident facade gave way to Slytherin practicality. "Oh gods. Wands out. This could get nasty."

Deanna and Marlie, whose minds had been working along much the same lines, joined them, having now retrieved their wands. Bracing themselves, they settled down to watch the fight.

"Three, two one, go!"

Draco lost no time getting the first blow in. "*Serpensortia!*" The crowd drew back, shrieks and gasps of horror echoing around the room. A huge black snake had exploded out of Draco's wand and was now coiled in front of Harry, raising its head up and looking like it was about to strike. Marlie screamed and hid behind Deanna. She'd always hated snakes. Luella, watching it, wondered why. OK, so it was fanged, poisonous and probably about to bite someone. And yet, it looked strangely cute, in a slithering and venomous kind of way. Luella briefly wondered what the chances were of her parents letting her have one. Not high, she suspected. And the chances of Marlie letting her bring one anywhere near Hogwarts were non-existent.

"Don't move, Potter. I'll get rid of it." Snape raised his wand leisurely, clearly enjoying himself just a little too much.

Unfortunately for Harry, Lockhart got there first. One blast of magic later, and the snake went flying ten feet in the air, heading straight for Marlie. Terrified of snakes she might be, but Marlie was still a Slytherin and she had enough presence of mind to grab a nearby Hufflepuff boy and thrust him into the snake's path instead.

The snake hit the floor with a horrifying smack. Luella gasped in shock.

"Oh my god, is it OK?" She noticed the looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her.

"Lu, if your first concern is for a deadly, fanged, venomous, extremely dangerous serpent, then to be honest, I'm rather more worried about you." commented Rianne.

Deanna was characteristically more forthright in her opinion. "You, girly, are disturbed."

They turned their attention back to the snake. It had reared up in front of the Hufflepuff, even more annoyed, and looked as if it was preparing to strike. Luella turned to Harry.

"Don't just stand there, do something!" she begged him. Last thing they needed was a death on their hands.

Harry didn't hesitate. He leapt forward, brandishing his wand at the snake and shouting "Leave him!"

And to everyone's surprise, the snake did just that. It backed off, curled up and lay docile on the floor. Luella let out the breath she had been holding and looked at the snake again. No doubt about it, it was definitely cute. I want one, she thought.

Snape stepped forward and made the snake disappear, much to Luella's disappointment. She'd been half hoping they'd let her keep it. Maybe if she asked Malfoy how to do that spell...

She turned to Deanna, expecting to see her looking as relieved as she felt. To her surprise, Deanna was looking deeply concerned. She looked around. So was everyone else. In fact, Deanna's expression was probably the most benign one there. Everyone else seemed alternately confused, hostile or frightened.

Luella turned back to Harry, who seemed as puzzled as she felt. His eyes met hers. She shrugged and gave him a look of sympathy. He smiled weakly back, before Ron began tugging at the back of his cloak, dragging him away with Hermione's help, hustling him out of the Hall.

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The gathering broke up shortly after that. Everyone seemed too freaked out to want to continue.

The four girls headed back for the Serpents' Nest. Luella decided that enough was enough. What was everyone so worked up about?

"So what was all that about?" she asked, genuinely bewildered.

"Your guess is as good as mine." said Deanna, her face more grim than anyone had ever seen it. "How on earth did someone reared by Muggles learn Parseltongue, I'd like to know!"

"Parseltongue?" Luella's confusion was not helped in the slightest.

"The language of snakes." said Rianne. "Harry was speaking to that snake in it."

"He was?" Now Luella was really confused. It had sounded perfectly normal to her.

"Course he was, Lu, didn't you hear him?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "It's not like it wasn't loud enough, after all. Gods know what he was saying. Could have been trying to encourage it for all we know."

"He wasn't." Luella had never liked hearing Harry picked on, and she wasn't about to let her friends get away with it now.

Deanna was now looking strangely at her too. "What do you mean, he wasn't?"

"You mean, you couldn't hear it?" Luella asked in surprise.

Deanna shook her head. "Lu, he was speaking Parseltongue. Only snakes and Parselmouths can understand it."

Luella stood firm. "Well, I don't know what was up with you lot, but it sounded perfectly clear to me. Snake goes for that Hufflepuff kid, Harry leaps in and tells it to back off and it does. What? Stop looking at me like that!" All three of them were staring at her in varying degrees of horror and backing nervously away.

"You knew what he was saying." Marlie's voice was oddly devoid of emotion, as if she were struggling to keep it level.

"Yes, that's because he was speaking in English. Don't tell me I can't recognise my own language when I hear it." Luella went on to the defensive. What the hell was wrong with them?

"You heard the words in English?" Rianne's voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Well, yeah. Didn't you?" Luella looked at the three stunned faces before her. All three of them shook their heads.

"We just heard him using Parseltongue." whispered Deanna.

Luella began to feel distinctly queasy. "But... I heard him. I heard him say 'Leave him'. I did! What?" She stared wildly at each of them in turn, their faces getting ever more fearful. "What's wrong? Will one of you please tell me?"

Deanna and Rianne looked at each other, nodded, and each took hold of one of Luella's arms, frogmarching her swiftly towards the dungeons.

"Don't say a word, keep your voice down, and come with us." snapped Deanna, in a voice there was no arguing with. "We need to talk."

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Chapter Eleven Of Snakes and Slytherins

Not a word was said on the way to the Slytherin dorm. Luella still hadn't got a clue what was going on. OK, so it appeared she could understand the language of snakes. However, she still couldn't work out why her friends were reacting the way they had. After all, if Snape could talk to Deanna's falcon without anyone minding, what was so bad about being able to talk to snakes? She couldn't be the only one, surely. Could she? Well, apart from Harry, anyway. She made a note to go and talk to him afterwards, let him know that she was still on his side if no one else was.

They finally arrived at the dorm after the tensest ten minutes of Luella's life. Deanna and Marlie ushered her into the dorm, while Rianne shut and locked the door behind them. Luella found herself sat down in one of the chairs while the other three arranged themselves about her. They all looked very serious.

"So. Would one of you three mind telling me what this is all about?" said Luella, rather more sharply than she'd intended. The tension was beginning to get to her by this stage.

"You're a Parselmouth." said Marlie. No feeling, no sign of recognition in those cold, blue eyes of hers. No sign that the two of them had hung around together, worked together, played together throughout the last four years.

"I kind of gathered that." snapped Luella. "I'm more interested in why the three of you are now looking at me like I've just killed your entire families."

No one laughed. In fact, they were exchanging rather nervous looks as if they were worried she might.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" whispered Deanna. "You haven't the faintest idea what this means, have you?"

"No!" Luella nearly screamed at them. "I haven't! Now will the three of you snap out of it and tell me what the hell is going on? I mean, what is so bad about being able to talk to snakes anyhow?"

Rianne took a deep breath before replying. "It's bad news because it's not generally considered a talent possessed by good mages. In fact, it's historically been the preserve of the Dark Side. And not just your average tin-pot Dark Mages either. Parseltongue is linked to the most evil Dark Mages of them all."

"Which ones?" Luella asked, already guessing the answer.

"Salazar Slytherin regarded it as a speciality of his. The only other mage definitely known to possess it in this country..." Rianne hesitated before gathering her courage. "The only other mage known to have it was You-Know-Who."

"There's only one good mage known to possess it." Deanna took up the mantle of Bringer of Bad News. "One and one alone. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin."

"Salazar Slytherin's daughter." Luella whispered, her mind beginning to grasp what was going on. "The one who came up with the Redeemer Prophecy."

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "And now, we can add Harry Potter and you to the list."

"To the list of good mages or bad?" inquired Marlie, her tone of voice indicating that she was not at all sure which one Harry and Luella belonged in.

"Good mages, of course." snapped Deanna, although there was a lingering doubt in her eyes too which Luella was not slow to pick up on. Deanna was far easier to read than most Slytherins and Luella, never exactly unobservant, knew Deanna's reactions as well as her own.

It was Rianne who seemed least bothered by it all.

"Harry Potter is no Dark Mage. He hasn't got the imagination. And as for Lu being evil..." She turned on Deanna and Marlie with a look in her eyes that caused them both to shrink back from her in fright. "How could you think that for a second? Haven't you known her for long enough to know that's not true? Especially you, Tyler." Deanna looked away guiltily. Rianne continued, her wrath only slightly assuaged. "OK, so she's a Parselmouth. But what were you expecting? She's Slytherin Redeemer. The Heir of Slytherin." She spoke slowly, letting every word have time to fully sink in. "Of course she has talents linked with Salazar and You-Know-Who. In fact, come to think of it, I'd be far more surprised if she didn't. Morgan had it too, it's not the preserve of Dark Mages. Luella Martin is no Dark Witch. No more than any of us."

Deanna and Marlie were staring at the floor in contrition. Rianne's forthrightness had stung them into silence.

"Sorry, Rianne." Marlie mumbled.

"Yeah, of course Lu's not evil. How could we ever have doubted her? Sorry, Lu." Deanna lifted her eyes to meet Luella's, smiling hopefully.

"No worries." Luella replied, still a little shaken that they'd not trusted her.

"So what do we do now?" Marlie asked. "Evil or not, we can't just leave this."

"I'd say go to Snape." sighed Rianne, checking her watch. "Except it's far too late now. And we do have Potions first thing tomorrow. So I'd recommend getting some sleep. Tomorrow, after Potions finishes, we go and talk to him. And then we can take things from there. How's that?"

"Superb." yawned Marlie.

"Yeah, good thinking." Deanna said, rubbing her eyes. "Snapey'll know what to do."

Luella wasn't quite so sanguine. She had a horrible feeling that Snape's interest wouldn't stop with the Parseltongue. As the other three climbed into bed, she traced her fingers over the Mark on her arm and shivered.

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The next morning saw them all arriving at breakfast the next day as if nothing had happened. Rianne had instructed them all to act normal so as not to arouse anyone's suspicions. Then they could go to Potions as usual, and talk to Snape in private afterwards. So that, with all the self-control Slytherins were capable of, was what they did.

Luella, however, couldn't let it rest without doing just one little thing. She'd seen the way the rest of the school was reacting to Harry. They were all at pains to avoid him, and even Draco didn't seem to want to tease him. Things were getting pretty bad when even your worst enemy was scared of you.

As soon as breakfast finished, Luella took advantage of the crowds to work her way over to him without anyone noticing her.

"Hey, Harry." she greeted him.

"Hey Lu." he smiled back. Luella was not slow to spot the relief behind it. Not far away, Ron and Hermione were watching the two of them, Hermione pulling Ron back as if to give them some privacy.

"How've you been?" she asked awkwardly. Now that she was here, she wasn't quite sure what to say.

"Could be better." said Harry. His face turned serious. "Lu, you don't... I mean, you don't think... oh hell. You don't think I was telling that snake to attack Justin, do you?"

"Justin? Oh, right, him." Luella, able to tell various herbs apart blindfold, did not have the same ability when it came to Hufflepuff second years. "No, of course not Harry. It was perfectly obvious to me that you were telling it to back down. I don't know what all the fuss is about."

Harry's face lit up. "Thank you! I am so pleased you said that! Thank god there's one person who doesn't think I'm the Heir of Slytherin." Doubt flitted across his face. "You don't, do you?"

Luella burst out laughing with the irony of it all. "You? Heir of Slytherin? No way! Harry, I can categorically state that there is more chance of Professor McGonagall getting a tattoo and joining the Hell's Angels than you being the Heir of Slytherin. Heck, *I'm* more likely to be Heir of Slytherin than you." Now that was certainly true.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Harry seemed to regain his confidence. In fact, he was positively strutting. "I can't be the Heir of Slytherin, surely. I should stop worrying. I'll tell Justin what really happened and the whole thing'll just blow over. Thanks, Lu.

You know, I hoped you'd understand. You didn't look anything like as terrified as everyone else. In fact, you looked as confused as I was. Almost as if..." He was looking at her rather thoughtfully. Luella swiftly changed the subject.

"Well, I'd better get going." she said hastily. "I've got Potions next and you know how Snape is with latecomers. Even Slytherins. Bye." And with that, she raced off in search of her friends.

Harry watched her go, all sorts of thoughts running through his head as Ron and Hermione joined him.

"So what did she want then?" Ron asked, in the usual surly and cynical mood that Luella's presence invariably invoked.

Harry pulled his friends aside so no one would hear them and lowered his voice.

"I think Lu might be a Parselmouth too."

"What on earth gives you that idea?" gasped Hermione, clearly sceptical.

"Last night." Harry told them both. "She was the only one, *the only one*, who didn't look scared. She just looked confused. As if she could understand what I'd said to it and didn't know why everyone else was so upset. That would explain why she was comforting me - she knows exactly what I said to that snake and wanted to make sure I didn't get too down. You know, the more I think about it, the more it makes sense." Harry seemed quite taken with this idea.

Hermione was less thrilled about it. "And where's Lu going to learn Parseltongue? She's a Muggle-born. She's hardly descended from Slytherin, is she?"

"She's in his house though." said Ron darkly. "All it would take is for one descendant to turn out a squib and there you have it - the possibility of Muggle-born Heirs."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron, for the last time, stop harping on about Lu being the Heir of Slytherin. She's a perfectly nice girl. Honestly, you're obsessed with the idea. Come on, let's get back to the common room. Herbology's been cancelled so we've got a free lesson. Come on." She ushered both boys away in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. The conversation soon turned to other things, and Harry and Hermione soon forgot about Luella being a Parselmouth. Ron, however, couldn't stop thinking about the idea.

It made sense. It made perfect sense. Luella Martin, a Parselmouth and no doubt Heir of Slytherin too. It explained why she'd left the feast and been found at the scene of the first attack. It explained what Deanna and Rianne had been referring to - they must have had their suspicions, if they hadn't known for sure. And it went a long way towards explaining Luella's confidence that Harry wasn't the Heir. "I'm more likely to be Heir of Slytherin than you." Well, how deeply ironic, Martin, Ron thought. And now we both know that it also happens to be true. Ron quickened his pace as they neared the Gryffindor Tower entrance. Going to a teacher was out of the question, at least for now. After all, he didn't really have a lot of evidence yet. However, now he

knew, he could certainly keep an eye on her. Weren't they planning to infiltrate the Slytherin common room after all? Well, he could certainly make use of the opportunity to do a little digging around. However, he began to wonder whether it might not be a good idea to impersonate Marlie Lovegood, Deanna Tyler and Rianne Stormosi instead of Crabbe and Goyle...

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"What happened to you?" Deanna asked as Luella rejoined them, cursing quietly at her own stupidity.

"Harry knows." was the brusque response.

"Knows what?" asked Marlie. "There's so many secrets about you for him to find out, after all."

"He knows I'm a Parselmouth." Luella lowered her voice to avoid anyone else hearing. "I just went over to tell him not to worry, I didn't think he'd deliberately set the snake on that kid, and he realised that I'd known what he was saying."

"Oh for god's sake."

"Bloody hell, Lu!"

"Lu Martin, you are a complete and utter prat!"

The expressions on her friends' faces ran the gamut of emotions from exasperation to... well, actually that was pretty much it. Exasperated summed it up.

"I'm sorry!" Luella tried to defend herself. "I just felt sorry for everyone thinking that he's some Dark Mage so I thought I'd comfort him."

"And now we've got someone else in on the deal. Nice one, Lu!" snapped Deanna.

"Look, it's only Harry!" Luella protested. "It's not like Malfoy found out or anything. Harry won't tell anyone. And he's a friend of mine."

"I know, I know, but this isn't the sort of thing we want everyone else knowing!" Deanna sighed. "Better if Harry's out of it."

"Anyway, Harry and Hermione might be your mates, but Ron hates you." Rianne pointed out. "First thing Harry will do is tell them both, and then we have the problem of Ron Weasley knowing something about you which he could do all sorts of nasty things with. Would you trust him in that sort of situation? Because I wouldn't!"

"She's right." said Marlie. "Ron's a cool bloke with people he likes, but with people he hates, he's a nasty vindictive piece of work. He's almost as bad as Malfoy. Worse, in a way. At least Malfoy gets it all out of his system by mistreating people he hates. Ron's too fundamentally decent to sink to that level, so he lets it all build up inside until he can't control it anymore. And you know what Gryffindors are like at self-control..."

No one said anything as they let that image sink in. Yes, they all knew exactly what Gryffindors were like at self-control.

"Bloody hell." Luella moaned. "I'm doomed."

"Well, he might not use it against you." said Deanna, ever the optimist. "I mean, he is a Gryffindor."

"Might is not as good as won't." said Rianne, for whom optimism was something other people did. "Still, no help for it now. Come on, we'd better get to Potions. Don't want to keep Snape waiting." She led the way to the dungeons, Deanna, Marlie and a despondent Luella trailing in her wake.

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The lesson started normally enough. The four of them were the last to arrive, and Snape was just getting the lesson underway.

"Nice of you four to put in an appearance at last." he remarked, glancing irritably at his watch.

"Sorry, sir." gasped Rianne. "We got held up in the corridors. Won't happen again."

"Glad to hear it. Now sit down." He turned back to the blackboard as the four of them took their seats. "Weasley, while I am sure Miss Tyler is more than worthy of your adulation I must ask you not to do it in my class. Five points from Gryffindor."

Fred, caught in the middle of punching the air and whispering "Go, Tyler!", sat down in frustration. How on earth had Snape seen him?

Severus couldn't help smiling as he looked in the mirror concealed by a well-placed Invisibility Charm. An invaluable teaching aid, which enabled him to keep an eye on the class even when his back was turned. Another movement caught his eye. Lucas Vetinari thumping the desk and muttering something under his breath. How odd. That was the third time this week that a Slytherin had done that in class, and both occasions had been just after he'd taken points off Gryffindor. Most strange. Why a Slytherin would be annoyed at Gryffindor losing points, he had no idea. However, he was sure there was some logical explanation.

"Lost your stake, did you Lucas?" Deanna murmured with a grin. "Never mind. Better luck next time."

"I'd swear you two rig this." Lucas muttered back. "I don't think I've won it once yet. And Rianne over there bloody wins it every time she plays."

"If only I knew how to rig it, mate." sighed Deanna. "As for Ri, I don't know what her secret is, but Marls and I have had to restrict her participation. Looks bad if a friend of the organisers keeps winning."

"I still think that the whole thing's unethical." said Luella with a frown. "Honestly, you're not meant to be using school discipline as a way of making money!"

"Lighten up, Lu!" Deanna nudged her playfully in the ribs. "It's just a bit of harmless fun."

"That's what you think!" hissed Luella. "Did you know that half the house has been deliberately getting Gryffindors into trouble so as to get closer to their sweepstake total? Only the other day, we had Blaise Zabini sabotaging Lavender Brown's Shrinking Potion. Bloody thing went green and started chucking out poisonous fumes. We could have had a nasty accident!"

"Oops." Deanna did not, however, look sorry.

"Then there's all the Slytherins who've been undercutting each other to make sure Slytherin's final tally doesn't go over! Deanna, you're making a mockery of school rules!"

Deanna turned to the two Slytherin boys in front. "Hear that, lads? I'm making a mockery of the discipline system."

"Since when have you ever done anything else?" asked Alex Lynch in confusion.

"At least this way we're getting money out of it. Correction, everyone else appears to be making money out of it." Lucas's irritation over never winning took precedence over teasing Luella. "I'm losing Sickles hand over fist. So, Deanna. Are you open to bribery, or is this thing genuinely unfixable?"

"I'm hardly likely to go to Snape and ask him if he'll take precisely thirty seven points off Gryffindor this week, am I?" retorted Deanna. "He'll guess what I'm up to and put a stop to it. Either that or he'll want a cut of the winnings."

"I still wouldn't put it past you." muttered Lucas as he returned to his note-taking.

Either Snape hadn't noticed their whispered conversation, or, more likely, hadn't cared. Regardless, he'd continued writing on the board and now had them making a mild Ageing Potion. It was then that it happened.

Luella stifled a scream and clapped a hand to her arm as the pain hit her. Deanna dropped her Potions tools at once.

"Lu? What is it?"

"Nothing." gasped Luella, her eyes watering from the pain. "I'm fine. Really."

"Fine? Lu, if that's fine then Lockhart's a champion dueller. I'm getting Snape over here."

"No!" Luella cried, but it was too late. Deanna was already standing up and gesturing frantically to Snape. However, he was busy telling off Alicia Spinnet and hadn't

noticed Deanna calling him. Finally, Deanna drew her wand in frustration. Time for another trick that she'd learnt from her mother.

The Attention-Grabbing Charm shot into the air with a scream and exploded, with a very loud bang and a shower of green sparks. Everyone turned to look, their hands over their ears. Well, Deanna reflected, it wasn't really meant to be used in confined spaces after all. However, that wasn't important right now.

Snape was striding over to her, eyes blazing with fury. "Deanna Tyler, what on earth do you think you are doing? That particular piece of magic is not meant for use indoors! And it's certainly not meant to be used in my lesson. It could prove extremely dangerous. Do you mind telling me what you think you're playing at?"

Deanna remained unfazed. "Sir, Luella's not well. Her arm's burning."

Snape's anger dissolved in an instant, much as Deanna had hoped it would. "Miss Martin?" He turned to Luella. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." whispered Luella, trying to act as if her arm didn't feel as if it had been dipped in acid.

"You don't look it." Snape looked as if he were doing some very quick thinking. "Right. Miss Tyler, Miss Martin, Miss Lovegood, Miss Stormosi, in my office now. The rest of you should pack up your things and return to your common rooms. Miss Martin has spilt some of her potion on herself. I'll need to prepare an antidote for her. It could take some time, so this lesson is cancelled. Go back to your common rooms, and stay together! I don't want you wandering around the school. You four, with me."

Deanna and Rianne took Luella by the arms and hauled her after Snape into his office, the looks on their faces clearly indicating that it was about time this got sorted out. Marlie followed behind, wand out just in case Luella tried to make a dash for it, although it also had the handy effect of discouraging any awkward questions. Not that there were any. The words "Potions is cancelled" were not ones you argued with in case Snape changed his mind.

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Snape ushered them all in to his office and closed the door. Luella felt her heart sink as she heard the lock click. Evidently he didn't mean to let her go without getting to the bottom of this. Which pretty much meant that the game was up. She sighed, taking a last look at her friends. Would they still be that way in half an hours time, when she'd no doubt be packing her bags for home? She doubted it. Tears came to her eyes and it wasn't just from the pain in her arm.

She was barely aware of being made to sit down, and of Deanna and Rianne letting go of her. Then Professor Snape kneeling next to her. Slowly, the pain began to fade away, and she was able to open her eyes.

"Show me your arm." he was saying.

"It's stopped hurting now." said Luella, hoping against hope that he'd be satisfied with that and not probe any further. No chance.

"Good, that's one thing off my mind. But I still want a look at that arm." His voice was not one you argued with. However, Luella was just desperate enough to try.

"No, look, it's OK." she stammered as she got to her feet and headed for the door. It seems fine now, so I'll just be on my way."

"Luella." Snape's hand shot out and caught her wrist. "I don't want to have to hurt you or humiliate you, but unless you let me have a look at your arm, you will leave me no choice. Now. Show me that arm."

Luella stared helplessly at her friends. Deanna was standing apart from them all, hiding her eyes, her entire posture giving out the unmistakable message that although she wanted no part in this, nor would she raise a hand to stop it. Marlie by contrast wasn't taking her eyes off her, her face cold, wand out and her attitude one of not only wanting this to go ahead, but being more than willing to assist if need be. Shivering, Luella turned to Rianne.

Slowly, Rianne raised her eyes to Luella's. She was shocked to read there, not coldness, but pain and fear. Rarely did you see Rianne admitting she was afraid.

"Lu, for gods' sake, just show him your arm." she whispered, her voice cracking up. "I can't believe that even now you're still trying to struggle on your own. Just spare my nerves and show him, alright?"

Luella hung her head in defeat. Rianne was right. No point fighting, really. Plus she'd not thought at all how her friends must have been feeling.

"Alright." she heard herself say. "Alright, I'll show you." She gave Deanna one last pleading look, begging her to understand. "Forgive me." She pulled her wrist out of Snape's grip, and began rolling her sleeve up, exposing the Mark on her arm for all to see. Closing her eyes so she didn't have to see the looks on their faces when they saw it, she sat down and let them examine it.

To her surprise, she didn't hear screams and cries of repulsion.

Just Rianne breathing "What the hell is that?"

And Marlie replying "I don't know, but it looks pretty cool."

And strangest of all, Deanna saying "I have no idea what it is, but I'll tell you this - it's on our coat of arms."

Luella opened her eyes. "It's what? On your coat of arms?"

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "It's got four quarters and a different symbol on each one - a red dragon, a total solar eclipse, the inevitable peregrine falcon and that thing. Never did work out what it was."

Luella couldn't take it in. "The Tal-y-Rhys coat of arms has a Dark Mark on it?"

The first inkling that she'd said something wrong was Rianne and Marlie staring at her in confusion, and Deanna looking highly offended.

"No it bloody hasn't!" snapped Deanna. "That's not a Dark Mark, you prat."

"It isn't?" asked Luella, relief beginning to spread through her.

"Hardly." said Snape, who was still on his knees, staring at the Mark as if in a trance. "Quite the reverse. It's a caduceus."

"A what?" asked Marlie blankly.

"I knew that." said Deanna.

"It's the wand given by Apollo to Mercury in exchange for the gift of music." Snape explained, tracing his fingers around the serpentine shapes of Luella's Mark. "It granted him access to all the worlds, those of the gods, mortals and the dead, and opened up the secrets of magic for him. It is said that he was the one who derived the arts of magic we all use today and taught them to humankind using the caduceus. It's one of the most powerful symbols of healing and transformation there is. And it is as far from the Dark Mark as you could possibly get." He let go of Luella's arm and began going through various cupboards. "I need a mirror, I'm sure there was one here somewhere."

Marlie rummaged through her bag and came up with a small hand mirror. "Will this do?"

Snape took it from her. "A little small, but it will serve our purposes. Thank you, Miss Lovegood." Kneeling down again, he placed the mirror next to her arm, allowing her to see the Mark properly. "There. Look well, Slytherin Redeemer. See the symbol of your destiny and your power. And on seeing it, accept them both."

Luella looked at it, curious now. Ever since it's mysterious appearance, she'd shrunk from it in fear and loathing. Not now she knew what it really was. It was a golden rod topped with something that resembled a Golden Snitch. However, far more interesting to her eyes were the two snakes entwined round it, one black, one white, in a serpentine double-helix that, far from inspiring fear, was actually rather fascinating to look at.

"Wow." she whispered.

"Indeed." smiled Snape, returning the mirror to Marlie. He got up and returned to his chair. "It appeared on Halloween, did it not?"

"Yeah." Luella nodded.

Snape did not seem surprised. "It would have done. The night the Chamber was opened."

"So the Chamber of Secrets gets opened and Lu gets a funky new snake tattoo. This might sound a little off the wall, but would someone mind explaining why?" Rianne's usual deadpan style was back.

"I'll do my best." Snape promised. "The caduceus is an ancient symbol, but not so very long ago, a young witch who felt she needed the power it offered adopted it as her personal Mark. You all know her name. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin."

"What, Redeemer Prophecy chick Morgan?" asked Marlie, wide-eyed.

"The very same." said Snape, amused.

"So that's why it's on our coat of arms!" said Deanna, enlightenment dawning. "But what's that got to do with Lu?"

"Everything." Snape's smile vanished. "When Salazar was defeated, and created the Chamber, he set magic around it, powerful magic. One of the spells was that when his true Heir opened it, Salazar's symbol would appear on his arm, marking him out as the Chosen One. Once the Mark was in place, he would assume his true power as Heir of Slytherin and be able to pursue his destiny. That Heir was Lord Voldemort. And sure enough, when the Chamber was opened last time, Salazar's Mark appeared on his arm. You know it better as the Dark Mark." He paused, letting that sink in.

Deanna was first to speak. "So where does that leave Lu? After all, she's Heir of Slytherin too."

"Very true." Snape's silky tones were quiet, but they had a resonance you could not ignore. "But it was never said which Slytherin."

Rianne arrived at the answer in a flash. "She's not Salazar's Heir at all, she's Morgan's! And that's why the caduceus appeared on her arm when the Chamber was opened. It was a wake-up call for her. You-Know-Who has Salazar's Dark Mark, and Lu's got Morgan's Mark."

"Oh well done, Miss Stormosi." Snape's eyes danced with delight. Rianne grinned, looking rather smug. "You are quite right. Morgan couldn't undo what her father had done, but she could give future generations a fighting chance. So she added magic of her own to the Chamber, spells mirroring those of her father. She must have primed it so that when it was opened by her Heir, that Heir would be marked by her insignia, then laid down a prophecy that would ensure all would happen according to plan. Most think of her as a great Seer, but what they forget is that she was a very powerful Tal-y-Rhys, and witches like that don't just see the future, they shape it. I don't think she was predicting the future when she made that prophecy. She was giving it instructions."

"Oh gods." sighed Deanna. "That's all we need, my great-great-great-times-whatever-grandmother telling us all what to do. Our only hope is that she's nothing like my mum."

"Why, what's so bad about Caitlin?" asked Luella.

Deanna rolled her eyes as if to say 'you need to ask?'. "Lu, my mum's a lovely person and a very talented Auror, but she's also got this really twisted sense of humour. And if Morgan's the same way, I'm really not looking forward to this."

"I am sure Morgan Tal-y-Rhys knew what she was doing." murmured Snape, soothing Deanna's anxieties. "Luella, I wouldn't worry any more. Nothing evil can touch that symbol - it's got powers we can only imagine. Don't fear it. See it as your shield, your totem. See it as your seal of authority. You are officially the Heir now. Morgan's crowned you with her own personal Mark."

"But it wasn't me who opened the Chamber." whispered Luella.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be." said Snape. "Maybe it was just necessary for another to open it while you were in the building. Didn't you feel as if you were being summoned?"

"Yeah, I could hear this woman's voice calling me." Luella recalled what had happened that night, her new knowledge casting a whole new light on it. "Morgan! Her magic must have kicked in as soon as the Chamber opened, and it started calling me over so I could use its power. And that explains why it burned last time, every time the Chamber's opened I can feel it."

Snape was nodding, seeming to understand. "I suppose you're a Parselmouth too?"

They all started at this. What with everything else, they'd forgotten about the Duelling Club.

"Er, yeah." Luella admitted. "Is that good?"

"It's inevitable. Both Salazar and Morgan had that talent. Only natural their Heirs should have it too. I knew you had it as soon as I saw your reaction to the snake last night. Only Parselmouths look at snakes as if they were sweet, cuddly animals."

"But they are!" Luella protested.

"Alright, Lu, now you're freaking me out." said Marlie, backing away.

"I rest my case." said Snape, suppressing a smile. "And then there was the fact that you and you alone were not frightened or surprised when Potter spoke to it. That merely confirmed it. Don't be alarmed, it's a perfectly natural talent. However, I would advise you not to advertise the fact - most mages are apt to feel uneasy around Parselmouths, as Potter is about to find out." At this, a rather nasty smile began to spread across his features.

"OK, so that's Lu explained." said Marlie. "But what about Harry? Why's he a Parselmouth?"

"My dear Miss Lovegood, as to that, I am none the wiser. However, I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation." The smile vanished as he got up, his manner now brisk and efficient. "You four had best go back to the Serpents' Nest. If the Mark burned not

long ago, then whoever's been opening the Chamber could well be at large as we speak. Which is why I instructed your fellow students to stay in a large group and go straight back, not that I have too many hopes of them obeying me. Stay there until your next lesson, understand?"

"Loud and clear sir." said Rianne as she got to her feet. "Right you three. Get moving." And with that, she ushered them out of the office.

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Surprisingly, the other students in the class had actually done as they'd been told and gone straight back to their common rooms. After all, there was a blizzard raging outside, it wasn't exactly warm inside, and few of them felt like studying.

Hermione and Ron glanced up in surprise to see the Gryffindor fourth year arrive. Ron checked his watch.

"What are you lot doing back here? Shouldn't you be in class? Not like Snape to let you out early."

Fred flung himself into a nearby chair and put his feet up on a table, cocky as ever.

"Got cancelled." he grinned at them.

"What?" gasped Hermione. "Why?"

"Cancelled?" If Ron's jaw had dropped any lower it would have been scraping the floor. "Your Potions lesson got cancelled? You lucky bastards. You lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky, LUCKY bastards!"

"Aren't we just?" George draped himself over the back of his twin's chair, easily matching him in the smug stakes. "Luella Martin spilt her Potion over herself and burnt her arm in the process. Snape called the lesson to a halt so he could sort her out with an antidote. Cool, eh?"

"Nice one!" Ron turned to Hermione. "Bet he wouldn't have done that for one of us. If it had been anyone else, he'd just have told them to go to the hospital wing."

"Well, it got us out of Potions, so who cares." replied Fred. "Hmm, something to bear in mind. Hey George, remind me to bribe Tyler next time, bet she'd be up for it."

"Never mind that." snapped Hermione. "How is Lu? Is she alright? What potion were you doing?"

"Erm..." Fred turned to shout across the common room at Angelina. "Hey! Ange! What potion were we doing just now?"

"Ageing potion, you moron." came Angelina's rather unimpressed South London tones. "You know, the mild one that only ages you up one year per dose. Honestly Fred, can't believe you've forgotten already."

"Well, you know I never bother paying attention in Snape's classes." Fred responded. "There you go, Mione. The mild Ageing Potion. As for Luella, don't worry about her. Doubt there's anything wrong with her that Madam Pomfrey can't sort out. Catch you both later." He sauntered off to play Exploding Snap with George and Lee Jordan.

Ron was still shaking his head in disbelief, unable to believe his brothers' luck. "Can you credit it? All the times we've had injuries in our Potions lessons, and he's never cancelled a class, not once. Then Little Miss Teacher's Pet Martin gets a tiny little injury and the entire class gets sent off so he can make sure she's alright. Typical bloody Slytherins, eh Mione? Mione?" Hermione hadn't answered. Instead, she was staring into space frowning.

"Oh bloody hell." sighed Ron. "Mione! Snap out of it, woman! Rejoin the human race and talk to me!"

"Eh? What?" Hermione blinked and looked around distractedly before turning back to Ron. "What is it? I was thinking."

"You're always thinking. It's not good for you. What was it this time?"

"About that Ageing Potion that Lu got burned by." Hermione retrieved her Potions book from her bag and looked up the recipe. "Yes, here it is." She pointed out the ingredients to him. "As I thought. It's not toxic. Not even irritating. Not at any stage of its preparation. If Lu spilt some on herself, all that should happen is that she gets wet and possibly stains her robes. It shouldn't need treating."

"It shouldn't?" Ron's interest had been fired into action by this. "So why's Snape calling off lessons all of a sudden? I mean, he must know it's not toxic."

"I don't know." replied Hermione, not at all her usual self-confident self. "I really don't know. But I'm not at all sure I like this."

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Apart from a few general enquiries after Luella's health, several words of congratulations for having got them out of doing work and more than a few grumblings from those whose chances of having won anything in the sweepstake had been adversely affected, no one really asked any awkward questions about Snape's admittedly out of character behaviour. As Fred had so rightly put it, when Snape cancelled his lessons, you didn't argue in case he changed his mind. Even if you were a Slytherin.

The four girls made use of the unexpected free time by retreating to their dorm to discuss developments. Marlie in particular was most taken by Luella's Redeemer Mark, as it had now been christened.

"For the last time, Marlie, no I am not giving you one!" Luella snapped at her. "No! I don't care how well it would go with your black t-shirt! You are not having a Redeemer Mark!"

"Oh, Lu. Please! Go on, say you will." Marlie turned on the charm, hoping Luella would give in like she usually did. Unfortunately, Luella's mind was made up.

"No. Marlie, it's a very powerful symbol that can repel all evil and some say can even bring the dead back to life. It's not a fashion accessory!"

"Exactly! A tattoo that looks great with my entire wardrobe and does cool stuff too! What more could anyone want?" Marlie seemed surprised that anyone could think of it differently. Luella could only groan and turn to Deanna and Rianne for support.

"Will one of you please tell her why she can't have one? She's driving me nuts!"

"Marlie. Five words. Your mum will kill you. And I can't see your dad being overwhelmed by it either. Hey, that's a point. Worked out what you're going to tell your parents yet?" Rianne asked. Luella didn't answer. Rianne gave her her most penetrating gaze. "You are going to tell them, aren't you?"

"No. Come on, Ri, you are joking aren't you?" Luella could only shake her head in amazement at how the mind of your average pure-blood worked sometimes. "Ri, they're Muggles! They were bad enough when they found out I was a witch. Took Caitlin's Glamour powers to win them over."

"It's true. I was there." Deanna added. "First time I've ever seen Lu sulk and throw a tantrum."

"You? Threw a tantrum?" Marlie stared in shock. That didn't sound at all like the Luella Martin she knew.

"Yeah. Look, I was eleven and I wanted to go to Hogwarts with Deanna, alright? I was entitled, I think. Anyway, no I'm not telling them about the Mark. That would involve explaining about the whole Redeemer thing, they'd only worry and make a fuss, and they'd probably insist on withdrawing me from Hogwarts. No, it's probably best that they don't know. They're only Muggles. It's not their fight. I don't want them involved." Luella suddenly began to feel very alone as the full implications of all this dawned on her. It truly wasn't their fight. They couldn't help her. And if Voldemort ever came calling, they couldn't protect her. She pulled her cloak around her in a futile attempt to block out the fear and restore some semblance of being a normal teenager. It didn't work.

"Damn Voldemort." she whispered, frustration and anger beginning to rise. "Damn him! And damn Morgan too! How dare she pick me out for this! What the hell did I do to get landed with this!" She began to pace up and down the dorm, feeling cheated. Cheated of a normal adolescence, cheated of a normal life, literally marked out as different from her peers, denied the comforting awareness of most teenagers that no matter how bad things got, they'd always have a secure home life waiting for them, parents to pick up the pieces and sort things out for them. Whereas she was dealing with something no one should be expected to struggle with alone and she couldn't even talk to hers about it.

"Someone please tell me why the hell I got chosen? Did I ask for the hand of destiny to come and catapult me into centre stage? Did I ask to be singled out as special?"

"Well, actually, once or twice you did." Deanna pointed out. "I distinctly remember us both on several occasions going on about how we hated Surrey, and you definitely said you'd like nothing better than to find out you were really royalty or something. Anything that was more interesting than middle-class Surrey."

"That is NOT what I meant and you know it!" snarled Luella. She rolled up her sleeve to reveal the Mark again. "Look at it. Look at it! Contrary to popular belief, it is not a cool new fashion accessory. It's not some new fad. It is not designed to set off my hair, my eyes or the latest sleeveless tops from Tammy Girl! I didn't ask for it, it got put there! Painfully! Still want one, Marls? Because you're welcome to it! Believe me, if I could transfer it over to you, I would." She sank down on the bed, her rage having burned itself out, leaving her with just misery to indulge in. "Believe me, if I could get out of this I would. God, I'd love to get rid of this... this thing!" She covered up the Mark in one swift, brutal movement, before curling up, head hidden behind her knees.

It was Deanna who got up to comfort her. "Hey. Hey, Lu. It's OK. I'm here. I'll look after you. Don't cry, mate. I'll help you. Every step of the way, you know I will."

"What are you going to do, duel him?" Lu's voice was muffled, but the sarcasm came across loud and clear. "This is Voldie we're talking about here, not Gilderoy Lockhart."

Deanna suppressed the urge to giggle. Clearly Luella couldn't be too upset if she could still manage witty quips and one-liners.

"Maybe not. But give me time. When I've done all my Auror training, I'll be unbeatable. Voldie watch out!"

Luella looked up. Her eyes were still red-rimmed and tear-stained but she was smiling.

"Thanks mate." She pulled Deanna into an embrace, face buried on Deanna's shoulder. Behind her, she was dimly aware of Rianne sitting down, tracing her fingers through her hair.

"See, Lu? It'll be OK. You've got me and Marls rooting for you. And you've got Tyler on your side. Gods know I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her. Rather You-Know-Who's enemy than hers."

Luella couldn't help chuckling. Now there was an image. Death Eaters invading Hogwarts at six in the morning and slinking out with their tails between their legs after getting yelled at by Deanna. The scary thing was, she could see it happening too.

And then there was Marlie sitting down on her left, one hand resting gingerly on her shoulder, as if she was worried anything more would be turned away.

"Lu." Now that was unusual. Marlie Lovegood sounding timid. "Lu, about what I said earlier. About wanting a Redeemer Mark. I'm sorry. It was completely insensitive. Can you forgive me?"

"Course I can, Marls." Luella murmured. "Where would we be without your vanity and shallowness to cheer us up and make us feel superior?"

Marlie ignored the teasing, relief that Luella seemed to be OK outweighing any desire to get even. However, she was too much the Slytherin to let it go entirely.

"After all, there's a bit too much white and gold in it. Doesn't really suit my skin. Now, if you could come up with one in black and dark green..."

Luella let go of Deanna and sat up, looking Marlie straight in the eye. While there was certainly a hint of mischievousness there, you could never be sure with Marlie. Best to be on the safe side.

"Rianne," Luella said, just a little too calmly, "pass me a pillow, would you?"

Rianne did so, eyes longing to ask why, but her tongue too shy to speak. Luella took it from her, again quite calmly.

"Thank you." Luella took the pillow in her arms, held it for a few seconds, then in one fluid movement, the expression on her face not changing once, she swung it round and hit Marlie squarely in the face with it.

Marlie shrieked, the blow sending her sprawling over the bed. For a second or two, she lay where she'd fallen, too stunned to react. Then...

"Luella Martin, I'll get you for that!" In no time at all, Luella's other pillow had been appropriated and revenge exacted.

This time, it was Luella's turn to stare into space for a bit. However, she was not in shock long, and within minutes a full-scale pillow fight had broken out.

Deanna and Rianne sat back, observing the two of them fight.

"You know, that looks kinda fun." Rianne commented.

"It does, doesn't it?" Deanna agreed. "And that reminds me. Marlie and I never did settle that duel last night. Rianne, if you'd care to join me...?"

Rianne nodded, and without further ado, both girls had seized pillows from their own beds and joined in. Marlie and Luella both yelled and swore as they found themselves under attack from behind.

"Oh, so you want a fight, do you?" shouted Marlie, brandishing her pillow. "Alright then. Bring it on!"

Luella by contrast wasted no energy on words. One well-timed blow later and Deanna had been sent sprawling.

From there, things escalated into all-out war, with alliances being made and then broken, and any kind of code of conduct being ruthlessly shredded to pieces and made a mockery of. No, not even a pillow fight could go ahead without cheating when Slytherins got involved. It was brought to a halt only by the bell signalling morning break.

More than a few eyebrows were raised as the girls emerged into their common room.

"What happened to you?" asked Kat Stormosi, looking her sister up and down in amazement.

Rianne carefully plucked a feather out of her hair. "Marlie Lovegood and Deanna Tyler caught me in a pincer movement on Lu's bed. A massacre was prevented only by Luella's timely ambush from behind on Marlie, leaving me free to deal with Tyler. By the way, DT, you've got feathers all over your back."

"Have I? Damn." Deanna hastily began brushing her robes ineffectually. Luella stepped in and began using Banishing Charms on her.

"You were having a pillow fight? Remind me how old you are again, Ri?" Kat was beginning to smirk at Rianne in that typical big sister way of hers.

"There is nothing wrong with indulging in a little fun from time to time." Rianne, standing on her dignity, was in no mood to let Kat get to her. "Anyway, those two started it." She indicated Luella and Marlie, who were now Banishing the feathers off their own robes.

"Less of the we, thank you very much." snapped Marlie, as she de-feathered Luella's hair. "I seem to remember this one getting the first blow in."

"Now you're not going to tell me that that remark of yours didn't warrant it?" Luella grinned, her spirits well and truly restored. For a while at least, she'd been an ordinary teenager again.

Sadly, it didn't last. Kat was well and truly on her high horse.

"Well, while you four *children*," here a pitying gaze at her sister, "were off playing, the rest of us in the real world had important things to deal with. Did you know there'd been another attack?"

That killed the levity. Luella felt her heart sink. Of course. They'd all been so preoccupied with what the Mark meant that they'd forgotten why it had burned that morning.

"Who?" whispered Luella, her mind screaming please, don't let it be anyone I know.

"That Hufflepuff kid that Potter set the snake on last night. But that's not the scariest bit." Kat leaned forward, eager to impress her audience with the latest gossip.

"What's the scary bit?" whispered Marlie, ever ready to be impressed.

"Potter did it. It's true! He got found at the scene of the crime, with the kid's body in front of him. McGonagall dragged him off to Dumbledore's office. They're probably expelling him right now."

"No!" Luella shouted, almost without being aware of what she was doing. "It's not him, it can't be! They can't expel him, they just can't!"

"Lu, wait!" called Marlie, but it was too late. Luella had wriggled out of Marlie's grasp and bolted for the door.

"What's up with her?" Kat asked, confused.

"Harry Potter's a mate of hers." Rianne explained with a sigh. "Come on, you three. We'd better go after her. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid." The three of them headed for the door.

Rianne opened it, nearly colliding with a small, red haired figure in the process.

"Oh! Ginny. Didn't see you there." She took a closer look at the first year. She looked very pale and was trembling all over. Now while it was certainly cold in the school, it wasn't that cold. Especially not in the dungeons, where it never got chillier than ten degrees Centigrade even during the worst winters. "Are you alright? You look awful."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Ginny tried to smile. "Had a bit of a cold this morning, so I went up to see Madam Pomfrey. What are you three up to?"

"Just off to track down Luella." Marlie told her. "She's in a bit of a state. Did you know there's been another attack?"

Ginny clasped her hands to her cheek, going even paler. "A-another one?" she squeaked.

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "And that's not even the worst of it. They reckon Harry Potter did it. See, the victim was that Hufflepuff kid who that snake nearly attacked last night, and Harry was found at the scene, and well, now everyone thinks he was finishing the job."

Ginny gasped in horror, seeming close to tears. Marlie reached for her necklace out of habit. Something not right here. In fact, she couldn't help thinking that Ginny reminded her of someone, although she couldn't think who. Ah well. It would come to her.

"Harry Potter? No!" Ginny whispered. "But... they can't expel him. He defeated You-Know-Who! It's not him, it can't be!"

"Well, of course not." Rianne said, trying to reassure her. "And I'm sure Dumbledore won't expel him on the basis of rumour and circumstantial evidence. Don't worry, Ginny. We're off to track him down now and find out what happened. We'll let you know, promise."

Ginny nodded, her lower lip trembling. Marlie gave her a cuddle.

"Don't be scared, Gin. It'll be OK. Dumbledore'll sort it all out, you'll see. Come on, you guys.", she let Ginny go, "Let's go find Lu."

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Luella was in too much of a state to think about where she was heading, which was probably a good thing. If she'd stopped to think, she'd have realised that she didn't have a clue where to even start looking. She had no idea where Dumbledore's office was, and she certainly didn't have a clue where the Gryffindor common room was. If she had to guess, she'd have said up near Professor McGonagall's office, but even then that didn't really help her.

Fortunately, her instincts seemed to know exactly where to go. It wasn't long before she ran into Harry in the Charms corridor. Unfortunately, Fred and George had got to him first.

"Make way for the Heir of Slytherin!" she heard Fred shouting.

"Seriously evil Dark Wizard coming through!" George was laughing.

Normally, Luella would have told them both off. However, relief at finding Harry outweighed anything else just then.

"Harry! Oh my god, are you alright?" Without waiting for an answer, she pushed past the twins and flung her arms round the boy.

"Ooohh!! Harry's got a girlfriend, Harry's got a girlfriend!" Fred and George began chanting. Harry pulled himself loose, blushing furiously.

"She's not my girlfriend!" he snapped at them both.

"Of course not Harry." Fred grinned.

"Don't suppose the Heir of Slytherin's got time for a girlfriend anyway. What with trying to take over the school and all." mused George.

"He is not the Heir of Slytherin!" Luella yelled at them both, the ferocity on her voice surprising even her. Both twins stepped back, the levity gone.

"OK OK, we're sorry! Blimey, Lu, no need to shout."

"Yeah, we were just teasing him. No harm meant or anything." George tried his most conciliatory smile. Luella was only slightly pacified.

"Well, don't! It's not a laughing matter!" She turned back to Harry. "Are you OK? I mean, they didn't... you're not...." She broke off, unable to say it out loud. The dread word 'expelled' wasn't something you said out loud.

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore doesn't think it was me. I'm not in trouble."

Luella could have collapsed with relief. "Thank god. Thank god!" She reached out and gave him another hug. However, this time her Slytherin reflexes brought her to her senses. Getting all emotional? In public? Was she out of her mind? She let him go again, suddenly rather embarrassed. Strangely enough though, Harry hadn't seemed to mind, although he had removed his glasses and was now rubbing his eyes, as if trying to get used to the idea of being spontaneously hugged by a Slytherin.

"Anyway, I, erm, just wanted to make sure you were alright. I mean, you wouldn't believe the rumours flying round the Slytherin common room at the moment. Just wanted to find out what really happened. And I just wanted to let you know that I still don't think it was you. I know you wouldn't hurt anyone. Well, apart from Malfoy, but that doesn't count. Hell, I've hit Malfoy before now."

"Is he a git to you as well?" Harry asked. "Glad to see it isn't just me."

"You get it worst for some reason, but yes, he's horrible to lots of people, including his own housemates. Especially Deanna, she's one of the few who won't take any crap from him. Plus there's that little matter of her getting his mates' older sibs expelled in her first year."

"She did? Really? Wow!" Harry was looking very impressed, his own troubles forgotten. "Hey, is there any way she could do it again with Malfoy and co? Just as a matter of interest, you know."

"I'll see what I can do." Luella promised, her mood restored by the knowledge that despite what everyone was saying, Harry wasn't going to get expelled any time soon. "Anyway, I'd better go and pass on the good news to everyone else. See you around. And you two," here she turned to Fred and George, "stop teasing him! The poor boy's suffered enough!"

"Yes Ma'am." Fred saluted, clicking his heel together.

"Your wish is our command." George bowed. "By the way, is Lovegood willing to talk to Fred yet? He's kind of missing her- ow!" He clutched his head as his brother gave him a sharp smack.

"Ignore him, Luella." Fred was saying as he bundled his brother away. "He's always teasing. See you!"

"They're terrible, aren't they?" laughed Luella. "Almost as bad to each other as they are to the rest of us."

"I don't mind them." Harry replied. "Quite like it, really - I'm glad they don't believe it's me. I'm glad you don't either." He fell silent and for a moment, the two of them

just stood there, staring at each other, neither sure what to say. At length, Harry broke the silence and took Luella's hand. "It means a lot to me, you know. Knowing you trust me. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Luella felt herself blushing. Stop it at once, she told herself. He's just a kid, not even as tall as you, why on earth are you blushing? You're the Heir of Morgan, start acting like it!

"Anyway, I'd better go. You must have stuff to do. See ya, Harry." Luella withdrew her hand from his and left, trying to wipe the stupid and most unSlytherin grin that was threatening to get out off her face.

Stop smiling, woman! she heard this little voice snarling at her. He's a twelve year old Gryffindor, he has no idea what you are and he'd probably run in fright if he did! Why should his opinion matter? And yet, despite everything, despite the fact that on the surface, things were not really any better than they had been that morning, Luella couldn't help feeling happier than she'd done for a long time.

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Ginny, on the other hand, couldn't have been feeling worse. She looked up to Harry Potter as much as she had Ron. More, in fact - she hadn't spent half her childhood getting teased by Harry. And Ron, love him as she did, had never defeated a Dark Lord. And now Harry was accused of being one himself?

But it's not true! It can't be! she thought to herself. And then that nasty, niggling voice started up again. Of course not, it was saying. Of course it isn't him. We all know who it really is, don't we?

Shut up! she thought, tears springing to her eyes. Where is my diary, I need my diary. Tom'll know what to do...

Curling up on her bed, she reached for the small black book that had been her constant companion since her arrival at Hogwarts. To this day, she still didn't know where it had come from. She'd found it in amongst her school books after getting home from Diagon Alley and assumed it must have found its way in there by accident. She'd meant to hand it in to her parents, she really had, but she'd never got round to it and once she'd discovered its secret, she'd decided not to bother. After all, nice as Lydia and Autumn were, there were things she couldn't discuss with them. Things she couldn't even talk about to Marlie. Things like how lonely she felt sometimes, knowing that her brothers hated her, that her parents, despite their comforting letters, didn't love her quite as much as they once had, and that Harry Potter wouldn't look twice at her now. And more recently, rather more disturbing things. Picking up her quill, she began to write.

Oh Tom. I'm so frightened! It's happened again. There's been another attack.

And then the diary, her magical diary, began to reveal its secret, the special secret that made her loath to give it up. This diary could write back.

There, there, Ginny. Don't be scared. Tell me all about it.

Ginny plucked up her courage and began scribbling furiously.

Remember how I told you last night about the Duelling Club? And how Harry was a Parselmouth?

I remember. You said how he'd spoken Parseltongue to a snake that was about to attack another student.

Well, things just got worse. The student in question was the one that got attacked. And you know what was really bad? They found Harry at the scene! McGonagall's dragged him off to Dumbledore's office now. Marlie and Deanna think he might get expelled! Gods, Tom, I'm so worried!

Ginny laid her quill down so she could wipe the tears away. Taking a few deep breaths, she composed herself and continued.

The worst thing about all of this is that I don't remember where I was. Again. I had another one of my blackouts. I remember being in the dorm this morning, telling Autumn and Lydia I didn't feel well and that I might go and see Madam Pomfrey. They left, and that's all I remember until I came to in the middle of one of the corridors, covered in chicken feathers. Oh Tom, I'm so scared it was me! I'm so scared that I... that I... might be the Heir. You know. The Heir of Slytherin. I mean, I've been having blackouts since the start of term. Kept having what I thought were weird dreams, then waking up in the dorm fully dressed and with feathers all over me. Then on Halloween, I didn't feel well enough to go the feast, so I fell asleep in here then woke up covered in paint. And when Colin Creevey got attacked, I had nightmares that night too, then woke up standing and dressed. Then there's this morning. Three attacks, Tom! Three of them, and each time I black out then come to somewhere other than where I fell asleep. Each time, I don't remember where I was or what I was doing. And to cap it all off, Lydia tells me that there's an old prophecy saying the Second Heir of Slytherin is due to appear at this time, and that she'll be a girl. It's me, isn't it? I just know it is!

The writing faded away, and soon, the diary was writing back, in calm, measured tones that seemed almost as if they were designed to cope with hysterical eleven year olds.

Hush now, child. How do you know you're the Heir of Slytherin?

But... But I must be, if I'm causing the attacks.

Now, now. There's no evidence whatsoever that you are causing the attacks. After all, no one's seen you do it. You don't recall doing them. Alright, so you've not been yourself lately. But don't you think you've got every right to be a little stressed? After all, your brothers are ready to disown you and you said yourself you can't face seeing your parents again. And then there's that nice Harry Potter who barely noticed you before and is unlikely to look twice now. You've had a lot to be upset about lately, it's understandable you've not been well, and that you've been having scary dreams that

you can't remember. I wouldn't be surprised if you've been sleepwalking too. Come now, Ginny, if you were the Heir, you'd consciously remember attacking those Muggle-borns, wouldn't you? You'd have planned it in meticulous detail, and you'd be sitting in the common room afterwards gloating over it and planning your next move. Wouldn't you?

I... I suppose so. Ginny's hysteria had faded a little. Tom did have a point. The Heir of Slytherin would be able to remember what she'd done, after all. And she had been under a lot of stress lately, maybe she had just been sleepwalking.

Of course you would, Ginny. Now you stop worrying. You'll only make things worse. Just calm down and go about your business as normal.

You don't think I should tell anyone? I mean, I don't want Harry to get expelled.

I'm sure they won't expel Harry unless they're sure it was him. As for you, no, don't tell anyone. There's no evidence you were involved so why incriminate yourself? No, far better to keep quiet. No sense getting all worked up over a bit of sleepwalking.

No. No, you're right. Everything'll be fine. It'll all blow over, I'm sure. Thanks, Tom! You've really put my mind at rest!

No trouble, Ginny. No trouble at all.

However, as Ginny closed the diary and put it back in its usual hiding place, the doubts began to creep back. Maybe she should tell someone. But who?

The door opened and Lydia wandered in, presumably to collect her things for the next lesson, which, Ginny realised with a groan, was Potions. Not that she didn't like the lesson, but Snape had a way of making you want to confess every wrong thing you'd ever done and beg forgiveness. The other girl noticed her there and smiled.

"Hey, Gin. Feeling better? Reckon you'll be up to a lesson with the Snapemeister?"

"Maybe." Ginny swung her feet onto the floor and reached for her own Potions equipment. After all, Tom had said act normal, and she didn't want to give Snape a reason to be suspicious.

"That's the spirit." said Lydia, stashing her ingredients into her cauldron. "Besides, you're rather good at Potions - we need all the points we can get given that he cancelled Lu Martin's lesson. Damn it, that class is always good for points - I'll never make my sweepstake score now. Which reminds me. Heard the goss?"

"What, about the latest attack? Yeah, Marlie told me. You don't think it really was Harry, do you?" Ginny was desperate both for concrete news and an accurate reading of the rumour temperature, and Lydia Vetinari was invariably a good source for both.

"Who can say?" she shrugged. "I personally don't think it was him - it just seems too obvious, and besides, he's a Gryffindor. When they go bad, it's usually obvious and he seems OK. Dumbledore doesn't seem to think it was him either - Autumn and I ran

into Lu Martin on the way in here and she reckons he hasn't been expelled or anything. On the other hand, everyone else seems all too willing to believe it. You wouldn't believe the rumours I've heard this morning, and that was before the attack."

"Poor Harry." whispered Ginny. "I hope he's alright."

"He'll be fine." Lydia said as she began gathering Autumn's cauldron and ingredients. "They're not punishing him, it's the holidays soon anyway, he'll just have a rather uncomfortable week until it all blows over, which these things usually do. Come on, let's go. Autumn's waiting for us in the common room. Well, I say waiting. Desperately trying to finish off that assignment before the lesson starts would be more accurate. Done yours?"

"Yeah, it's finished." One thing Ginny did like about Hogwarts was Potions lessons and not just because it was an opportunity for easy points. For some reason, it came quite naturally to her. In fact, she really couldn't see why Ron had always moaned about it. It was far and away the easiest subject on the curriculum and Snape wasn't nearly as bad as her brothers had made him out to be. In fact, he seemed to like her. Certainly he'd always been perfectly polite to her. Maybe Marlie or Deanna had had a word with him or something. Whatever, it meant that Potions was not the weekly torment that her brothers had made it out to be, for which she was eternally grateful. She had enough on her plate to deal with without Snape being sarcastic at her.

"In that case, watch out. Autumn'll want to copy. Honestly, she's terrible. I know it's Snape but even so..." Lydia gathered up everything and swept out. Ginny followed her, grinning as she listened to Lydia complaining about Autumn Montague's endless procrastination. Now that she knew Harry wasn't going to be expelled, her mood had picked up considerably. However, she couldn't rid her mind entirely of the suspicion that maybe, just maybe, Tom's insistence on keeping things quiet was given with something other than her best interests at heart.

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As Lydia had predicted, the Slytherin common room was alive with rumours and speculation. And when Professor Snape pinned up the list for those who were staying at Hogwarts over the holidays to sign, the stampede to sign it was notable by its absence. Three days before the holidays and not one name up there.

"So. Nice and lively Serpents' Nest over the holidays, I don't think." Draco mused. "Honestly, anyone would think we were living in a danger zone." He turned to face the rest of the Slytherins. "Come on, you lot, where's your sense of adventure?"

"Strangely enough, Malfoy, I'd quite like to have a restful holiday. Without having to look over my shoulder constantly in case the Heir of Slytherin's right behind me waiting to stab me in the back and haul me off to the Chamber of Secrets." Marlie retorted from the black bean chair where she was writing the last of her Christmas cards.

"Lovegood. Heir. Of. Slytherin. He's one of us, you idiot! We'll be safe." Draco shook his head in disbelief at his cousin's naivete.

"We might be. She won't." sneered Pansy, looking up from the bit of last minute homework she was doing. "Her dad's a Muggle, isn't he? She'll be first in line. Not surprised she's running home to Mummy."

"When you've quite finished insulting my family." Marlie's voice was calm, but the acid in her tones made up for the lack of emotion. "If Muggle things are that filthy, you clearly won't want that personal CD player you ordered then, will you? Gods forbid I should pollute your no doubt wonderful home with that disgusting Muggle technology."

It was quite strange how Pansy backed down at this. "Ah, now, Marlene, let's not be hasty about these things. I was merely commenting to Draco here as to how owing to your no doubt honourable Muggle ancestry, you were in just that bit more danger than the rest of us. That's all." Pansy's conciliatory smile began to crack as the hysteria beneath surfaced. "So I'm sorry for any implication that I was insulting your family or indeed Muggles in general, so please don't cancel my order for a CD player."

"Alright." Marlie shrugged. She wasn't convinced but money was money and she'd never been one to go back on a deal. "You'll get your CD player. Which reminds me, Draco, you're overdue on a payment for your stereo system. Those things don't come cheap, you know."

"Can I pay you after Christmas, cous? I'm a bit short at the moment - had lots of presents to buy, see. I'll be loaded in January."

"You'd better. Or come the summer I'll be repossessing it." Marlie warned him.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "You ordered a stereo system? What, one of the big ones with huge speakers and more lights and buttons than Mission Control?"

"Yeah." Draco shifted uncomfortably. "What? They're cool things to have, alright? Almost as cool as a Nintendo console. What???"

"Nothing, Draco, nothing." sighed Pansy, exchanging looks with Millicent and Blaise. "Honestly, anyone would think he's Muggle-born sometimes, the amount he's been going on about Muggle stuff this term. Next thing you know, he'll start wearing those scratchy blue trouser things underneath his robes. What are they called, Levvys or something? **MILlicent GET THAT BLOODY CAT AWAY FROM MY HOMEWORK!!**" She shoved frantically at Millicent Bulstrode's scruffy grey mongrel tom cat, Mr. Flibble, who was currently showing an undue interest in Pansy's Herbology assignment.

Millicent scooped him up, hurt. Despite her usual unsentimental practicality, there was a huge blind spot in her awareness where her beloved cat was concerned.

"He's just being curious! Aren't you, Mr. Flibbly-wibbly-woo? Yes, you are, darling!" She tickled the cat under its chin, oblivious to its struggles to get away, which were covering her robes in cat hair. Pansy could only groan as she thumped the desk in frustration.

"Not you too! Honestly, are all my friends going soft or something? Blaise, please tell me you're still worthy of being Slyth. Blaise? Blaise!"

Blaise Zabini blinked as she seemed to snap out of whatever trance she'd been in. "Did you say something, Pansy?"

"Blaise." Pansy struggled to keep her voice level, beginning to have horrible feelings about whatever it was that Blaise had been thinking about. "What were you staring at?"

Blaise blushed and looked away. "Oh, er, nothing, Pansy."

Pansy's voice became dangerously quiet. "Blaise. Tell me. Now."

There was no arguing with Pansy when she spoke to you like that. Blaise swallowed nervously.

"Erm, I was just looking at Draco and wondering what he'd look like in those Levvy things you were talking about. Quite cute, I'd imagine."

"AARRGHH!" Pansy screamed in frustration, burying her head in her arms and sobbing in despair.

Draco himself was paying no attention. He was more concerned with the as yet empty list on the notice board.

"It's really very disappointing, you know. I had hoped some of you lot would be brave enough to stick it out. But no. You all turn out to be a bunch of wusses after all."

"I notice you haven't put your name down." Marlie remarked, idly watching the progress of one of the blobs in the lava lamp on the table next to her.

"Lovegood, if you think I'm spending Christmas on my own, you're very much mistaken. Hello, what's this?"

Ginny had emerged from the corridor leading to the girls' dorms with a quill in her hand and a zombie-like expression. Without saying a word or acknowledging anyone, she shuffled up to the notice board and signed her name on the list, before turning away and walking off again.

Draco watched her go, beginning to grin. "Well, well, well. I'd forgotten about the Slytherin Weasel. So our little convert doesn't want to go home, does she? Afraid of what her parents'll say when they see her, is she? Well, we can't have her spending Christmas all alone, can we?" Without further ado, he'd borrowed a quill off Pansy and signed his own name beneath Ginny's, before offering it to Crabbe and Goyle. "Come on you two, sign up. Let's give Ginny a bit of company, shall we?" Crabbe and Goyle signed the list and Draco handed the quill back to Pansy, looking rather pleased with himself.

"Draco!" snapped Marlie. "You little..." She turned to Deanna, who was too preoccupied with one of the plasma globes to have noticed anything amiss. "Tyler, snap out of it. Ginny's decided to stay here over Christmas, with only Malfoy and friends for company. We have to do something!"

"Aren't her friends staying over?" Deanna inquired, busy making pretty plasma patterns.

"Good point." Marlie got up and went off in search of Lydia and Autumn, who were discovering the joys of Jenga. "Hey, you two. Did you know Ginny's staying here over Christmas? All on her own?"

"Yeah." Lydia replied, carefully removing a block from a particularly tricky position. "We tried to talk her out of it, but she insisted. Said she can't face Christmas dinner with just her parents, as her brothers are all staying too. So she's staying put."

"We did say she could come home with one of us if she wanted." Autumn added. "It's not like there isn't plenty of room, after all. But no, she turned us down. Said she couldn't put us out like that, and she'd stay here. We tried, we really did."

"You could have stayed over yourselves." Marlie's voice carried just a hint of menace. Autumn was not slow to pick up on it.

"What, and get picked off by the Heir of Slytherin? No thanks."

"Do either of you care about Ginny at all?" Marlie glared at them both. So much for solidarity. Why, when Deanna had decided to stay over to entrap Crabbe and Goyle's older sibs, Rianne and Lu had volunteered to stay and help without a second thought.

"Sure we do!" said Lydia. "But she's been acting so weird lately, it's been near impossible to help her! She's being so moody and self-pitying, there's no point. Anything we say gets the same 'no, no, I'm quite alright' response and a depressed sigh. We have tried asking what's wrong, we have tried inviting her over to ours over the holidays, and we did actually offer to stay and keep her company, but she told us not to worry about her, just to go home and enjoy ourselves. Marlie, we've tried, we really have, but she's not making it easy for us!"

Marlie fingered her necklace. Lydia seemed to be telling the truth, and Ginny certainly had looked pretty depressed just now.

"Alright, alright, I believe you." Marlie sighed with frustration. Now what? If Ginny's friends had tried every way they could think of trying to snap Ginny out of her depressed state, what could she do? Force some company on her?

Deanna turned round furiously as Marlie slapped her on the back.

"What?" she snapped at her. "I'm busy!"

"Playing with *my* customised plasma globe?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Explain to me the definition of 'busy' that that falls under some time, would you? But never mind that. This is important."

"It had better be. What is it, is Snape on to the sweepstake or something?"

Marlie shook her head. "No. It's Ginny. She's staying over on her own. With only Malfoy and cronies for company."

"She's not!"

"She is. Doesn't want to go home for obvious reasons, won't stay with one of her friends, and goes all self-pitying Jewish Mother on them when they offer to stay over with her."

"Bloody hell." sighed Deanna. "Well, what are you going to do? Drag her back to yours?"

"No. Far too much effort involved. I'm staying over with her."

That got Deanna's full attention. "You most certainly are not!"

"Why not?" Marlie bristled. "I can't leave her on her own! I promised I'd look after her! I'm not leaving her all alone with Malfoy - who knows what could happen."

"And who knows what could happen to you! Marlie, you're half-blood! It's not safe for you on your own!" Deanna urged. "OK, so you're OK when there's crowds of students surrounding you, and when the rest of us are around. But there'll be virtually no one here over Christmas. You'll probably be the only one here with any Muggle blood whatsoever. It'll be like walking around with a target on your back. Marls, I'm sorry, but I absolutely forbid you to stay here over the holidays."

"Well, do you have any better ideas?" hissed Marlie. "Because I don't, and I'd rather take my chances with the Heir of Slytherin than let Ginny take her chances alone with Malfoy!"

"Marlie, I understand your concerns perfectly, and I sympathise. But you're not staying over." Deanna took a deep breath and continued. "I am."

"You?" Marlie stared at her. "You'd really stay over to look after Ginny for me?"

Deanna nodded. "Yeah. Why not? I can stand up to Malfoy, no probs. And while I may not know who the man who conceived me is, I do know for sure that he's a wizard. I am therefore pure-blood and safe from any Muggle-hating Dark Arts types."

"Oh, Deanna, would you? Would you, really? Ah, thanks! You're such a good mate, you know that?" Marlie reached out and gave Deanna a hug in gratitude.

"I like to think so." Deanna replied, reaching for her quill.

She had just finished signing her name when Luella and Rianne turned up, fresh from raiding the library for books to use over the holidays.

"Whatcha doin', Tyler?" asked Rianne, peering over Deanna's shoulder.

Luella squirmed past her and saw Deanna's name on the list. "You're staying over? Why?"

Deanna tapped the first name on the list. "Ginny. I'm not leaving her alone with Malfoy."

"Well, you're not staying on your own. You against Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, that's hardly fair. I'll stay too." said Luella, swiftly arriving at a decision.

"You will not!" Deanna rounded on her with a ferocity that caused Luella to leap back in fright. "You're going home at the end of the week and there you'll stay until term starts again. I'm not having you here over the holidays at a time like this. It's too dangerous!"

"Dangerous? Oh come on, Deanna. What could possibly happen? I'm sure it's no more dangerous than during term time. Anyway," here Luella lowered her voice, "what has the Heir of Morgan to fear?"

"Me, if you don't stop being such an idiot." Deanna fumed at her. "You're not staying. I said it to Marlie and I'll say it to you. You're a lot more vulnerable when there's hardly anyone else around, like there will be over holidays. There's not the same safety in numbers. You'll be the only Muggle-born here, you'll be a Petrified kid walking. Sorry, Lu, but you are going home!"

"Deanna!" Luella protested. She decided to switch to pleading. "But we always spend Christmas together. It won't be the same without you. Deanna, please!"

Deanna looked away, clearly torn between what she wanted and what she knew was right. However, she wasn't the ethical pushover that Luella was.

"Lu, no. No, I mean it. Stop looking at me like that. You know I'd love to see you on Christmas Day, but it's not going to happen. Yes, I'll miss you too. No, I'm not giving in on this! You're not staying! And that's final! Ri, tell her."

"She's right. Lu, you're not seriously thinking of staying, are you? Are you mad? Do you have no concern for your own safety? Not to mention our nerves? Lu, there's no question. You're going home!"

"But, Ri..."

"No! I don't want to hear it! You're going!"

Luella gave in. If Deanna wasn't easy to get round, then Rianne was virtually impossible.

"Alright, alright, I'll go." she grumbled. "But what about you? Are you sure you'll be OK on your own?"

"She's not on her own." Marlie pointed out. "She's got Ginny."

"And she's got me." Rianne produced her own quill. "I'm staying too." She signed her name underneath Deanna's. "Well come on, I'm not one to leave you all alone on Christmas, am I?"

"You're staying too? Fantastic!" Deanna grinned. "Hey, thanks, Ri." She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Between you and me, I'm rather glad I won't be on my own."

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Finally, the last day of term arrived, much to everyone's delight. This year in particular was one where most students couldn't wait to get away.

Lessons had finally concluded, the Slytherins had celebrated the previous evening with a Christmas party to remember, and now the entire Serpents' Nest was engaged in an orgy of packing and panicking as everyone tried to locate all the books they'd need, all the presents they'd bought for their families, and all the stuff they'd bought for their schoolfriends.

Even with half its occupants remaining at Hogwarts, the fourth year girls dorm was in a state of chaos, what with Marlie chasing around in a panic trying to get all her textbooks, designs, half-built gadgets and extensive collection of colour co-ordinated robes and accessories into one trunk, without success.

"But this all fitted when I brought it!" Marlie could be heard wailing.

"That's what they all say." muttered Rianne.

Deanna was proving to be a bit more helpful. "Well then it'll all fit back in somehow. Here, let me give you a hand. And if we really can't get it in, then I'll try a few Tardis charms on it. Come on, let's get to work."

Leaving them to it, Luella took full advantage of the confusion to slip away quietly. Before she left tomorrow, there was just one thing she wanted to do.

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Severus looked up in surprise as his office door opened. Rarely did he get visitors on the last day of term.

"Miss Martin?"

"Ah, you recognised me. How sweet." grinned Luella, in a good mood despite herself.

"Ah, she's been taking sarcasm lessons from Miss Tyler." Severus said, mimicking her tone of voice precisely. "What can I do for you then? You seem happy enough, so I assume that all is well in the world of today's teenagers."

"Everything's fine. Marlie's having problems getting her huge pile of stuff into her trunk, but that's nothing new, she has this problem every year."

"Has she considered getting a larger trunk?"

"She did. Her stuff seems to have expanded exponentially so it doesn't fit the new one either." Luella took a seat, recalling why she was here. "Anyway, enough about me. How are you feeling, sir?"

"Very well, thank you. I'm about to be rid of most of the school, and I'm looking forward to a peaceful holiday."

"You should be so lucky. Malfoy, Deanna and the Weasley twins are staying here. Sorry, sir." Luella did not look sorry in the slightest.

Severus shrugged. "At least I won't have to actually teach them." He looked at her curiously. "May I ask why you're inquiring after my wellbeing? Most of my students don't do that unless they want something."

Luella shook her head. "No, not this time. I just thought I'd see how you were before I left, wish you a Merry Christmas, that sort of thing." She hesitated before continuing. This could go one of two ways, and one of them would completely embarrass her. Maybe both of them. Still, she was here now. Might as well get on with it.

"Oh, and I thought I'd get you this." She produced a small white envelope and handed it to him.

He took it from her warily, as if expecting some kind of trap. Luella felt oddly hurt by this. Surely, surely, he knew her well enough by now to know that she wouldn't do that to him? She watched as he opened the envelope and carefully removed the contents.

It was an ordinary Christmas card, nothing more. With a picture of a raven on the front.

"Well, I knew you liked them." Luella said, blushing. Severus didn't answer. He was tilting the card this way and that, watching the raven on the front cover take off and fly away, then return to its original position as he moved it.

"It's a combination of the best of magic and Muggle." Luella explained. "Marlie showed me how to make holograms and I used a few Animation Charms too. Thought I'd make it stand out a bit for you."

Severus looked up and smiled at her. Not a sneer. Not the usual malicious grin. A smile. A proper smile. The smile that did strange and wonderful things to her, causing

her insides to start melting and a rather stupid and decidedly unSlytherin grin to start spreading across her face. He's happy! she thought. Because of something I did! Cool!

"I'm touched. Thank you." He flipped the card open and began to read. "Dear Professor, Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thanks for all the support you've given me this term - I'm grateful. Wouldn't have survived without you. Best Wishes, Luella Martin." He closed the card and propped it on his desk, turning to face her, an unusually gentle look in his eyes. "You didn't have to go to all that trouble on my account, you know. It is my job after all."

"I know." said Luella, trying to ignore the stab of pain she'd felt at those words. I don't want to be part of your job, she thought. I want you to help me because you care about me! "But I thought I'd get you something. Just that you always look so alone." She glanced around the darkened office, bereft of personal effects, the hearth empty. "Sir, do you ever have the fire on in here?"

"Not often. It's never that cold in here, and one gets used to it after a while. But then, you're not me, are you?" He raised his wand, and the fire sprang into life. Luella felt herself relaxing automatically. Nice. She looked at her teacher again. He was so cute in the firelight. Luella felt her heart go out to him. Was this going to be another one of those moments where the boundaries between them blurred, where the teacher-student dividing line, never that strong in their case, would give way a little, allowing their separate lives to touch, allowing her a glimpse of what could be? She hoped so.

He was looking at her card again. "Thanks for all the support you've given me - well, Luella, you've always needed it more than most. My only regret is that you didn't come to me sooner. Why didn't you, it seems so out of character for you. I could have told you what that sign meant straight away and saved us all a lot of worry." He replaced the card, looking straight into her eyes. Luella looked away, embarrassed suddenly.

"I don't know." she whispered. "I just... I just thought you'd turn away from me. After all, I didn't know what it was. It could have been a Dark Mark for all I knew. I thought you'd hate me. I thought you'd abandon me on the spot." Her voice trailed off. She looked up, and was surprised at the conflicting emotions she saw there. Ferocity mixed with surprise mixed with a tenderness that stung her right to the core.

"I'd never abandon you." The words were everything she'd hoped for, yet terrifying to hear. She didn't move as he reached across the desk and took her hand. "Even if it had been a Dark Mark. I know better than most that things are rarely what they seem." At these words, his eyes seemed to move away from her, as if he were contemplating some painful memory. "Yes, I know it far better than most." he whispered, before turning back to her. "Ah, Luella, how could you think I would think you capable of such evil? I know you're not! Child, very little short of you consciously going over to the dark side would make me turn against you. That I promise you. Luella, I care about you and would never, ever hate you for any reason other than your deliberate and wanton betrayal of everything I've ever taught you. If anything like that happens again, come straight to me. Don't wait. Don't try to solve it by yourself. Come to me. I'll do all I can to help you. You have my word." Both his hands were clasped around hers now, and those eyes were gazing right into hers, penetrating her mind,

penetrating her very soul. Stop, please, she silently begged him. Stop before you uncover my deepest secrets, stop before I lose control completely, stop before I melt into your arms...

"Yes," she heard herself whispering. "Yes, I'll come to you. I promise."

Content with that, he released her and leant back, the intensity fading. Luella breathed a sigh of relief. Thank god that was over, she didn't think she could take too many more incidents like that. And yet she could hardly wait for the next one.

"Anyway," he murmured, amused, "it was the least I could do. I've not forgotten the kindness you showed me this term either. For which I am grateful." The amusement vanished and the intensity returned. "Thank you."

"Hey, I'm Slytherin Redeemer, remember? Just doing my job." Luella grinned, somehow managing to retain her composure, despite the memories of that night which were flooding back to her. Forget? How could she possibly forget? Each and every night since had ended with her replaying it to herself over and over again, each time different and yet the same, each time that bit steamier... Stop that! she told herself. Not in front of him!

"Well, for my sanity's sake, I'm very glad you did!" Severus returned. "See, I know how it feels to fear that someone will run screaming when they find out what I really am. You didn't run. And for that reason alone, you need not fear me doing the same to you."

Luella nodded, trying to get her thoughts onto a topic that didn't involve him pulling her to the floor and kissing her senseless. It was quite strange, she thought, but he really did look just like Deanna when his usual cynical mask was down. How no one else had spotted the resemblance she didn't know, although she suspected that it might have something to do with the fact that for people to entertain the idea of Snape being a father, they first had to entertain the idea of him having had sex, and that was something that the minds of most students were simply not ready for.

"She'll accept you one day, you know." The words were out before she could stop them.

"Who will?" The wariness was back, it seemed.

"Deanna. You do look just like her, you know."

For the first time, she saw pain in his eyes and immediately wished she'd kept quiet.

"She won't." There was a certainty in his words, a calm, final certainty that indicated this was not something open to debate. "She is not you, Luella, and if she ever finds out what I did to her mother, she will kill me. Quite possibly literally. No, Luella, I don't think there's much hope I'll ever be able to tell her how I really feel, what she really is to me."

Luella hung her head. No, it didn't really seem likely. But if she could see the two of them reconciled as father and daughter, she would. It would be the one thing that would truly, irrevocably make him happy. And one thing that didn't look like happening any time soon. However, maybe there was something else she could do for him.

"I'll be seeing Caitlin quite a bit over the holidays. Is there anything you'd like me to say to her?"

Severus froze. Luella watched all the emotions in his eyes fighting for expression. However, in the end he gave way to none of them.

"No. No, there's nothing I want to say to her."

Luella didn't argue. For all her desire to make him happy, the thought of him and Caitlin Tyler on friendly terms brought up all kinds of less pleasant emotions. After all, how dare she hurt him like that? No, maybe it was for the best that he didn't want contact with her.

"Alright then." She got up to leave. "Well, I'd better get back to the packing. Won't do itself after all, although I'm sure there must be some charms somewhere that can help." She found herself smiling at him in a way which surely indicated something more than mere respect, but strangely enough, couldn't care less.

"No doubt. I would tell you what they are, but I think it would be more beneficial if you did the necessary research yourself. Even you could stand to increase your learning, Luella."

"I'll let it pass." Luella replied. "Besides, after all the homework I've been given, I'll have quite enough to do. Merry Christmas? Ha! I won't have time for Christmas..."

"I'm sure you'll find time for it all somehow." He was watching her, a rather cocky grin on his face which matched Deanna's inch for inch, muscle for muscle. This was beginning to get quite unnerving, seeing her best friend's mannerisms in someone she'd fallen in love with. Definitely time to end this conversation.

"Probably. But I won't if I waste any more time hanging around here. See you next year, sir."

"See you next year, Luella. It was good to talk to you. Thank you." Amusement slipped away as the seriousness returned. "Season's Greetings, Morgan's Heir. May the darkness not take you this Midwinter time."

The formality of it left Luella lost for words. However, from some dark recess of her mind, the correct response came to her.

"And may your powers wax as the Sun does, Son of the Tal-y-Rhys." Luella smiled at him, not even bothering to wonder how she'd known she was meant to say that.

"Morgan's Heir indeed." Wonder mixed with a healthy dash of pride. "You see, you are accepting it already. Congratulations."

Luella shrugged. "What happens, happens. It has its good points."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin." Wonder had distilled itself into pure pride. Luella returned his gaze unashamedly. If excelling as the Heir of Morgan was what it would take to get that reaction on a regular basis, then so be it. Besides, she'd never really failed at anything in her life before and she wasn't about to start now. Ah, Professor, she thought, I won't just make you proud of me. By the time I'm through, you'll feel nothing short of adoration.

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Chapter Twelve Christmas at Hogwarts, Slytherin Style

Finally, all the packing was completed, the last presents for family wrapped, the last cards and presents for schoolfriends handed out, and the holidays finally got underway.

The last of the coaches taking the departing students off to Hogsmeade station trundled off along the drive, leaving just a handful of students who had gone to see their friends off, Deanna and Rianne among them. And alongside them, a shivering and apprehensive Ginny.

"Well, that's them out of harm's way." Deanna commented as the three of them trudged back inside the now deserted castle. "Or at least, as far out of harm's way as Marlie ever gets."

"I wouldn't worry." Rianne said, calm as ever. "Lu'll keep her out of trouble and it's not like there's anyone else to encourage her to get up to mischief. You, Malfoy and the Weasley twins are all here."

"True." Deanna agreed. She turned to Ginny, who was trailing behind despondently. "So, Ginny. Looking forward to your first Christmas at Hogwarts?"

"Yes thanks, Deanna." Ginny's eyes did not leave the ground.

"You sound thrilled." Rianne drawled. "Doesn't she, DT?"

"No, Ri, she sounds depressed. For which I don't really blame her given current circumstances. There's normally a few more people around for a start." Deanna listened to the echoes of their voices as they headed back for the Serpents' Nest and shivered involuntarily. For all her bravado about the Heir of Slytherin, now the school was empty, Deanna was a lot more aware that there was in fact a rather dangerous monster lurking somewhere within the bowels of the school. Stop it, she told herself, glancing nervously into the shadows. You'll freak yourself out. How the hell is Ginny meant to cope if she sees you getting scared?

Unfortunately for her, Rianne had noticed.

"Not scared, are you Tyler?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to hang around in these freezing cold corridors, that's all. Come on, common room." Without giving Rianne a chance to expose her further, Deanna quickened her pace and led both girls swiftly back to the Nest.

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Several hours later, and the Hogwarts Express pulled in at King's Cross. Luella and Marlie unloaded their trunks with a little help from some Levitation Charms, and headed slowly back for the Muggle world.

"Your mum not here then?" Luella asked, casting her eyes around for a sign of Mrs. Lovegood.

Marlie shook her head. "No, she's got to work. Dad's picking me up. I think we're going to the Leaky Cauldron and getting the Floo home."

"Floo?" Luella raised an eyebrow. "How's your dad going to manage that? He's a Muggle."

"He's very broad-minded about these things. Anyway, all he has to do is chuck some powder into the fire, step in and tell it to take him home. He's done it before, he'll be quite alright." Marlie did not seem overly worried about things. "Where has my brother got to?"

"Over there, saying goodbye to Kat Stormosi." Luella pointed him out. Marlie rolled her eyes.

"Should have guessed. Honestly, brothers and their girlfriends. Be eternally thankful you're an only child, Lu. Hold on, I'm going over there. We'll be here all night if we're not careful." Marlie turned and stalked over to where Mike Lovegood and Kat Stormosi were holding hands and giggling. "Much as I hate to interrupt you two, can I have my brother back at some point? Only it's not that warm out here and I'd like to get home at some point."

"Yeah, yeah, in a minute." Mike told her, his attention clearly on other things. "So, Kat, I suppose I'll see you at the Christmas party then."

"Try and keep me away." she purred, loath to let go of him. "Owl me when you get back, won't you?"

"The very second, my dear." Mike promised, before giving her another kiss.

"Michael!" Marlie yelled, beginning to get impatient.

"Alright, alright." Mike muttered. "Anyway, I'd best be off before my little sis here starts throwing a tantrum. Be seein' ya, Kat."

"Bye, Mikey." Kat called, turning away with a wave.

Mike waved back, dragging behind a little as Marlie hauled him away.

"Come on, you. Honestly, you're only going to be apart for a few weeks and you'll be seeing her again at Christmas anyway."

"Ah, what's the matter, eh sis?" Mike teased her, ruffling her hair and causing Marlie to shriek at him. "Jealous because you're still single?"

"No!" snapped Marlie, desperately trying to sort her hair out and restore it to its usual immaculate state. "Just cold, that's all!" She took another look at her brother, now in Muggle clothes. "Aren't you?"

"No, not really. I'm hard, me."

He must be, thought Luella, given the absence of anything resembling warm winter clothes. Torn jeans, Iron Maiden t-shirt, rather scruffy looking leather jacket, a couple of piercings and not a lot else. Deanna would have approved, Luella thought. As did quite a few other passing Hogwarts girls, who were all giving Mike Lovegood the eye. Eye-catching as it might be however, it didn't look designed to keep the wearer very warm.

"Too thick to notice the cold, more like." Marlie muttered, shivering despite the layers of Muggle clothing she'd changed into. You had to give Marlie her due - although no one was more attentive to the nuances of fashion than her, she was also very fond of her creature comforts and positively the last person to be seen wandering around in winter in a short skirt and skimpy top.

"I heard that!" Mike snapped at his sister, leading to yet another round of bickering, which didn't conclude until the three of them had left the platform and emerged into Muggle London, where their parents were waiting.

By one of those strange twists of fate, it seemed that Mr. Lovegood and Mrs. Martin had already met and struck up a conversation. Luella couldn't help being struck by the contrast between her own always immaculately turned out mother and Marlie's father, looking just like his son, except the hair was greyer, and the clothes, consisting of rather faded jeans, an old flannel shirt, beige woollen pullover and a thick black winter jacket, couldn't have been more aimed at practicality if he'd tried.

"Hi, Dad!" Marlie ran up to her father and gave him a hug.

"Hello, sweetheart. Good to see you again!" He returned the hug before letting her go and turning to his son. "Evening, son."

"Evening, Dad." grinned Mike, shaking hands with his father.

Luella turned to her mother. "Hi Mum."

"Hello, darling. How was school?"

Luella exchanged looks with Marlie, who looked like she was trying not to laugh. The truth clearly was not an option. Guess what Mum, I'm the Heir of Morgan Slytherin really wouldn't go down too well.

"Not bad. Nothing interesting really happened. Marlie's doing really well at Quidditch though."

"Yeah, we beat Ravenclaw by miles!" Marlie enthused. "And next term, we're getting some top new brooms too!"

"You're going to win the Cup back for Slytherin then, are you? Please do, your mother's a lot nicer to be around when Slytherin are winning." said Mr. Lovegood.

"Quidditch, that's the school sport isn't it?" Mrs. Martin asked her daughter, trying to remember everything Luella had ever told her about it.

"Yeah." Luella nodded. "Marlie's on the reserve team. Mike's on the first team. The reserves are leading the championship at the moment."

"Unfortunately the same can't be said about the first team." Marlie grinned at her brother.

"Shut up." muttered Mike.

"Their new Seeker's rubbish." Marlie continued. "He got hired because his father's rich and bought the team new brooms. Sadly, his father can't buy him any talent."

"Talking of your cousin." Mr. Lovegood interrupted. "Are you inviting him over this year? Seeing as he spent half the summer here and all."

Luella raised an eyebrow. Draco Malfoy had been over at the Lovegoods? Very surprising, although it did go a long way towards explaining why he'd been observed on several occasions displaying rather more knowledge of Muggle pop culture than Luella had thought he had. It also went a long way towards explaining why Marlie was blushing and carefully avoiding Luella's eyes.

"Hope not." muttered Mike.

"Nah, he's staying at school. Not that I'd've invited him anyway." Marlie said, flinging her hair back in one disdainful move. "Not after he stabbed me in the back and stole my job."

"Shame." replied Mr. Lovegood, unbothered by his daughter's attitude. "I quite liked the boy. Seemed such a nice young man."

Draco Malfoy? Nice? Luella, dying to ask all sorts of questions, couldn't take her eyes off Marlie, who was squirming very uncomfortably.

"Anyway," Mr. Lovegood was continuing to Mrs. Martin, "I'd better get these two off home, keep them out of mischief. Nice to have met you, Celia. Now are you sure you

don't want to come over to ours on Christmas? There'll be plenty of food to go around."

"Awfully nice of you, Leonard, but we couldn't. We're calling on some neighbours of ours anyway, so we won't be able to go, but thank you for the invitation."

"Never mind. Another time, maybe." He turned to Luella. "You'll be going, won't you Luella?"

"Of course. Try stopping me." Luella grinned. The opportunity to distract Marlie and ask her more about this nice side of Draco Malfoy was irresistible. No, not for all the world would she be missing that party.

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The days passed quickly. In Surrey, Luella spent the days doing the last of her Christmas shopping, getting her holiday homework done, and spending an inordinate amount of time on the phone to Marlie, who having been landed with Rianne's Defence Against the Dark Arts homework in addition to her own, was busier than normal and required copious amounts of assistance from Luella, more than usual anyway.

Meanwhile at Hogwarts, Deanna and Rianne passed the days by educating Ginny in just about every aspect of life as a Slytherin, ranging from house history and famous Slytherins, to Slytherin House's present day incumbents, who they were and how to deal with them, and ending up with Slytherin philosophy and general discussions on what it meant to be Slytherin, lavishly interwoven with stories of their first three years at Hogwarts. In all of this, Ginny proved to be an avid pupil, listening fascinated as she sat curled up on a foot stool by the fire while the older Slytherins talked.

Surprisingly enough, Draco, Crabbe and Goyle gave them no problems. For the most part, they kept themselves to themselves, only occasionally throwing them the odd dark look or engaging in a verbal skirmish, which Deanna and Rianne generally had no problems dealing with. Stranger still, however, was Draco's behaviour when Crabbe and Goyle weren't around or were otherwise engaged. He would move that bit closer to where the girls were sitting, put some books in front of him to give the appearance of doing work, and sit and listen to them. On occasion, one of the older Slytherins would notice and challenge him, to which he'd respond with his usual sarcastic comments before retreating. Deanna and Rianne would then ignore him and return to their discussion. Ginny, however, intrigued by his behaviour, started observing Draco behind his back, and uncovered a few more anomalies. Not only was he listening in, his eyes also followed them whenever he thought Crabbe and Goyle weren't watching. His attention was particularly focused on Deanna for some reason. Now this in itself wasn't too shocking - after all, everyone knew that Draco Malfoy and Deanna Tyler were perennially at each other's throats. However, what was surprising was the way he looked at her. It wasn't with the malice, spite or hatred you would have come to expect, although it wasn't exactly friendly either. In fact, more than anything, Draco just looked confused. Confused, and a little wistful. Curious. Very curious. Almost as if he secretly wanted nothing more than to drop Crabbe and Goyle and join in with their conversations. Well, Ginny couldn't blame him, they

were interesting little chats. Certainly compared to Crabbe and Goyle's company, anyway.

And then Christmas Eve arrived. While Ginny normally slept in the first year dorm, Deanna and Rianne were adamant that she was not sleeping alone on Christmas Eve. So it was that she found herself dragged protesting into the fourth year dorm.

"Look, you really don't have to do this, I'll be quite alright on my own, you know!"

"Nonsense." Rianne told her as she and Deanna hauled her into their dorm. "There's two beds going spare in here, it's no trouble. I'm sure Marlie or Luella won't mind if you borrow one of theirs for the night. It's Christmas! And you're not spending it on your own. Come on!"

"Oh, alright then." Ginny gave in. While she was well aware of the fact that Deanna and Rianne were staying over purely because Marlie had asked them to, they were quite good company and they did have a point - Christmas morning wasn't much fun on your own.

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That night, Ginny dreamed. Dreamed she was walking through Hogwarts, alone. It was night time, and her footsteps resounded eerily off the walls. She didn't know exactly where she was going but what she did know was that she was afraid. Terrified of what she might find when she got there.

Her footsteps led her into the Great Hall. Once again it was set up as though for the Duelling Club, and once again, a fight was in progress. Deanna was there, duelling Lockhart again, and as she had done before, was easily beating him. They were being watched by Professor Snape, whose eyes followed Deanna with a rather unusual expression in them, one of longing, loss and a frightening hunger.

The fight went on for some time, but finally, Deanna had Lockhart disarmed and pinned down, ready to strike a final blow. At this point, Snape halted proceedings.

"Not bad, Miss Tyler." he told her. "Not bad at all. But can you beat this?" He waved his wand and cast the Serpensortia charm again. It hit Lockhart and with an explosion of green sparks, he changed into the snake that Harry had had to face. Deanna backed away, a look of fear on her face as she stumbled away.

"Look out!" cried Ginny. Too late. Deanna, in her fright, had forgotten that she was only a foot away from the edge of the stage and lost her footing. Falling to the floor with a thud, the hood on her cloak covering her face, Deanna shrieked and curled up, her wand flying out of her hand, leaving her vulnerable.

Ginny looked around for someone, anyone to help her as the snake raced nearer. But there was no one. Snape was nowhere to be seen. Ginny hid her eyes as the snake reared its head back to strike.

The door burst open. Ginny looked up and breathed a sigh of relief as Harry strode in.

"Leave her!" he shouted. The snake immediately backed down and curled up, pacified. He turned to the fallen girl. "Are you alright?"

She pulled back the hood and staggered to her feet. Ginny gasped to see that it was no longer Deanna but Luella. She was wearing a white sleeveless top which left her arms bare, and Ginny could just make out what looked like a tattoo on her right arm. A tattoo? Surely not? After all, Luella was only a kid and she came from a fairly conventional Muggle background, she couldn't possibly have a tattoo. Yet that was what it looked like, a tattoo with two snakes entwined around a central column. How bizarre.

Harry was even now helping Luella up, one arm round her shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you!" she whispered, smiling in gratitude. Harry smiled back. And then it happened. The scar and glasses disappeared, the boy turned into a man and Harry Potter's face changed into that of someone else, a stranger to Luella but all too familiar to Ginny. It was the face of the voice in her diary, Tom Riddle.

"No problem, Luella." He was still smiling, but the evil in his eyes made a mockery of the good looking face that framed them. "After all, we can't have Morgan's Heir taken out by a tiny little snake like that, can we?"

Luella screamed and turned to run, but Tom was too quick for her. Grabbing her by the arm, he held the struggling girl captive before turning to a now terrified Ginny.

"Come on now, Ginny." The tone was gentle, but Ginny was not fooled. "Help me like you did before. Call the snake for me."

"No." Ginny whispered. "No! Not again, please!" She took a step backwards, uncomfortably aware that the room seemed to be shrinking, the walls closing in and the usual decorations vanishing as the Great Hall changed into a different room entirely, an underground chamber that Ginny had never seen before yet which seemed horribly familiar.

Tom was advancing on her, wand in one hand, a sobbing Luella in the other. "What's that? No? But Ginny, you've always been so willing before." The Malfoy-esque pout only served to heighten her fear. Backing away yet further, she found herself up against a pillar, with no way out. She should have been frightened. And yet, from somewhere deep within came a feeling of courage that she never even thought she'd possessed.

"Not any more. Not any more, do you hear me!" she yelled at him. "I'm not helping you any more! I'm not! I'm not! I'm not!" Her voice cracked as she kept on sobbing the words over and over again, sobbing helplessly, curling up in fear as those merciless eyes, now a horrifying shade of red, drew nearer and nearer, Tom Riddle's voice becoming colder and harsher as he kept on snarling at her to give in....

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"I'm not! I'm not! I'm not!" Ginny sobbed, struggling as someone grabbed her shoulder and shook it. "I'm not!"

"Not what?" a girl's voice asked her. "Gin, wake up!"

Now that didn't sound like Tom. She'd never imagined him as having a Welsh accent for a start. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Rianne was sitting next to her on the bed, wand lit up and raised above her, a look of concern on her face.

"Ginny, are you alright?"

She nodded weakly. "I think so."

Rianne placed her wand on the bedside table. "You didn't sound it. What happened? Bad dream?"

Ginny nodded again, too drained to speak. The malice in Tom's eyes was still real enough that she couldn't stop shaking.

The older Slytherin seemed to understand as she put her arms round the trembling first year.

"Trust me, I know all about them kid. Deanna has them quite a bit, although don't tell her I said that." She held Ginny close, stroking her hair in a way that brought tears to Ginny's eyes for a quite different reason, reminding her as it did of the way her mother had held her as a child. "What was it about, your family?"

Ginny seized at the straw held out to her. "Yes." she whispered. Rianne gripped her that bit tighter.

"They'll accept it one day, Gin." Rianne soothed her. "Trust me. They're your family. They do love you, you know."

"Ron doesn't." Ginny whispered.

"He does." Rianne told her. "He just doesn't realise it at the moment. But he will. He will. Don't ask me how I know, but he will."

"He won't." Ginny wept. "He won't. He holds grudges worse than Snape does."

"I doubt that." Rianne laughed. "Gin, he's a Gryffindor. It's not in their nature to hold grudges for long. They'll come round. You'll see."

Ginny nodded as Rianne let her go and produced a tissue, wiping her eyes with it. "Will you be OK now?"

"I think so." whispered Ginny.

"Good." said Rianne, a flicker of relief in her eyes. "You get some sleep, and if you have any more bad dreams, let me know, I'll go to Professor Snape and get some Sleeping Potion for you."

"OK." Ginny murmured as Rianne tucked her back in. "Thanks, Rianne."

"No problem, Gin." Rianne replied as she drew the curtain.

Ginny settled back in her bed, her worried mind not eased by Rianne's assurances. After all, it wasn't her family that she was upset about, was it? No way could she tell Rianne what was really on her mind. Because that particular nightmare had dislodged a few memories, hadn't it? It wasn't the first time she'd had it either, it had recurred a few times since the Duelling Club. But it was the first time she'd really remembered it.

It was also the first time that she remembered what had actually happened during her blackouts. Not completely. But there were fragments coming back to her. Memories of reaching for her diary, driven by a voice in her head, of opening it and this thing taking control of her. Of slipping unnoticed through the school, using secret passages she hadn't even known existed, that maybe not even Filch or her brothers knew about. Of standing in front of a mirror and speaking in a strange language that would have terrified her parents had they heard it. And of standing back and watching as this... thing... had emerged from a newly revealed passage way. She'd led it through the school, the monster using the water pipes to travel without being seen, and waited for a suitable target to present itself. And then...

She shut her eyes tight, not wanting to think about it. Thinking that she might be causing the attacks had been bad enough. Knowing it was far worse. And yet... it hadn't really been her, had it? She remembered Tom's eyes in the dream and shuddered. Her instincts had been right. He most certainly hadn't had her best interests at heart when advising her. The manipulative little...! Fear subsided as anger began to rise. He'd used her! Damn him. Damn him! Well, not any more! she thought, eyes burning fiercely. Her thoughts raced back to the diary, currently under the pillow in her own bed. Maybe that was why she'd remembered this time - the diary was too far away to affect her. Didn't matter now. There and then, she decided that she wasn't going to let it affect her again. She wasn't going to write in it anymore, she wasn't even going to look at it anymore. As of tomorrow, that book was going straight in her trunk.

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Ginny did eventually manage to get back to sleep, and she was not troubled by any more nightmares. In fact, the next thing she knew was being abruptly woken by the full weight of an overexcited fourteen year old.

"Wake up Ginny!" she could hear Deanna yelling, her lips about five inches from Ginny's ear. "It's CHRISTMAS!!!"

"It is?" Ginny asked faintly.

"Course it is. What, did the non-stop playing of Slade and all the decorations in the common room not give it away then?"

"I'd forgotten." True enough, what with all the dreams, she'd quite forgotten that it had been Christmas Eve.

"Forgotten?" Deanna stared at her in amazement. "How can you forget Christmas?" She turned away before Ginny could reply. "Never mind. Let's get Stormosi out of bed." Sliding off Ginny, she skipped over to Rianne's bed, flung back the curtains and dived in, yelling "MERRY CHRISTMAS!!" in much the same manner that she had to Ginny.

Rianne's reply was unintelligible, but the last two words sounded suspiciously like "off, Tyler!"

Deanna did not seem bothered. "Ah, come on, where's your Christmas spirit?"

"Sent it home as a present for my dad. Tyler, get off me."

Deanna backed off, letting Rianne sit up. She rubbed her eyes, blinked and looked around her, before spotting the huge pile of presents at the foot of her bed. The cynicism vanished immediately.

"Hey, presents!"

"See, even Stormer has an inner child somewhere." Deanna commented as she returned to her own bed. "Come on then, you lot. Open your stuff, let's see what everyone's got us this year."

The present-opening took some time. To her surprise, Ginny's presents had been brought in too. And even more surprising, some of them were actually from her family. A subscription to *Teen Witch* magazine from her parents, a gorgeous ebony cat statuette from Bill, a delicately crafted silver dragon brooch from Charlie, and a book of poetry from Percy, inscribed with a greeting that sounded just a touch more formal than it really needed to be, even by his standards. There was also a present from Fred and George, of which the mere reading out of the gift tag caused Deanna and Rianne to dive behind their beds.

"What's with you two?" Ginny asked in bewilderment. "It's a Christmas present from my brothers, not a time bomb or something."

"I wouldn't put it past them." Deanna called out.

"Yeah, where your brothers are concerned, we're taking no chances." Rianne added.

Ginny shook her head in disbelief as she tore off the wrapping paper to reveal a small treasure chest. "Honestly, you two. You don't trust anyone, do you? Can't believe your cynicism sometimes. I'm their little sister, they wouldn't play a joke on me." She unfastened the catch and lifted the lid. "You two are so - aaaaggghh!!!" Ginny

shrieked as a giant cobra burst out of the chest and lunged towards her. Instinctively, she pushed the whole thing away.

Deanna and Rianne emerged to see what the fuss was about and burst out laughing. Ginny was sitting back, pale and trembling, staring at a wooden chest with a stuffed snake on a spring hanging out of it.

"A snake-in-the-box! Classic!" laughed Deanna.

"Oh, very Fred and George." remarked Rianne. "I remember Lucas getting one of them a few years ago. Kept using it to terrify Lydia with. I think his mum took it off him in the end after she started having nightmares - she was only little. Hope you're made of sterner stuff, Gin."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine." said Ginny vaguely, trying not to think of an image from the recently unlocked memories involving another rather similar snake. "Bloody Fred and George, I'll kill them for scaring me like that." She noticed an envelope tucked inside the box and opened it. No unpleasant surprises this time, just a perfectly normal card with a message, which Ginny read out loud.

"Dear sis, Merry Christmas and stuff. What with you being a Slyth and all, we thought this was rather appropriate. Hope you like it, and that you and the rest of those wild and crazy guys in Slytherin have hours of fun with it. In particular, we believe that a lot of amusement could be derived from introducing Mr. Draco Malfoy and Miss Marlie Lovegood to it, however we'll leave the fine details to you, devious plotter that you must surely be by now (and if you're not, why not??). Anyway, have a truly brilliant day! We'll be thinking of you. Lots of love, your ever loving (no, really!) big brothers, Fred and George." Ginny laid the card down, suddenly overcome by a wave of happiness. "Oh, wow! They still like me!"

"Told you." grinned Rianne. "They're Gryffindors, they don't hold grudges for long."

"I know, I know, but..." Ginny struggled to find the words to express her feelings. "It's like, the rest of my family, Mum, Dad, Bill, Charlie, they're all being really nice about me being here but you can tell they're disappointed. While Percy's being perfectly polite and all, but you can tell he disapproves. And as for Ron, well." She gave a dismissive shrug. Deanna and Rianne knew what she meant. Ron's opinion of his sister's house was known to pretty much everyone. "But Fred and George, on the other hand... They got me this present precisely because I'm a Slytherin! It's like they're the only ones not afraid to mention it. They know I'm a Slytherin, and they don't mind! In fact, they actually seem to like the idea! They called us all wild and crazy guys!" Ginny sighed, a blissed out look of euphoria settling on her face. "Wild and crazy, wow!" she whispered dreamily. "Only people they really like get called that!"

"Good old Fred and George." Deanna remarked, giving Rianne a wry grin. "Trust them to come through for us."

"Yeah." smiled Rianne, relieved that Ginny's depression appeared to have finally lifted. "I will say this for them - they do have an unerring sense of what to do in these

situations. Good on them, Ginny's been miserable all holidays. Now look at her. She's her old self again. That perky little kid we first met on the train."

Deanna's smile disappeared. "Bloody Fred and George. Trust them to completely ruin my day. And they even manage to do it by proxy too! Honestly, anyone would think they were Slytherins or something."

"Killjoy. Anyway, you were the one waking us all up screaming 'It's Christmas!'"

"That's different." Deanna squirmed. Changing the subject, she turned back to Ginny. "What else have you got?"

Ginny was opening the last of her presents. "Cool! It's a CD Walkmage! From Marlie! Oh wow, Lydia and Autumn are going to be sick with envy when they see this - Lydia's still trying to save a deposit for one. These things cost at least fourteen Galleons normally!"

"She only charges that much because she can." Rianne pointed out. "Bet they don't cost her fourteen Galleons to make. In fact, I bet they don't cost her four to make."

"Cynic." Deanna laughed. "Impressed, Gin?"

"You bet!" Ginny nodded, eyes shining. However, the light did not stay in them long. "But I don't have any CDs to play on it."

"We thought as much." grinned Rianne. "Which is why me and Tyler got you a little something too. Tyler?"

Deanna went through her trunk and emerged with three small-ish square packages. "Here you go, Gin. One from the two of us, and one from Lu too. Hope you like them, we only had Marlie's word to go on with regards to your tastes."

Ginny ripped them open to reveal three CDs. "Cool! Madonna, Take That and Now 23! Ace! Ohhh, thank you! You guys rule!"

"No problem, Ginny." Rianne said, casual as ever. "Just that we could hardly have you as our honoured guest over Christmas and not get you anything, could we? It wasn't any trouble, really."

"It bloody was." muttered Deanna. "Honestly, going into that record store and having to buy a Take That record. Most embarrassing experience of my life. Did you know the guy behind the counter actually thought it was for me?"

"Deanna. Shut up." Rianne told her. "Got anything else, Ginny?"

Ginny searched around for more presents, but there were none. "No." The vitality oozed away and dejection returned. "Nothing from Ron."

"The git!" Deanna seemed, if anything, more offended than Ginny. "How dare he not get his own sister a Christmas present!"

"That's pretty low." remarked Rianne. "Anyone would think *he's* a Slytherin the way he's been acting."

"He is not acting like a Slytherin." snapped Deanna. "He is acting like a complete child. And next time I see him, I shall tell him so."

"No, it's alright." said Ginny, more sad than angry, and certainly not surprised. "I hadn't really expected him to get me anything. No need to shout at him or anything. Thanks though."

"You're taking this awfully well, Gin." said Rianne. "If it were me, I'd be far less happy about it."

"What, would you throw a tantrum or something?" asked Ginny, curious. Now that would be something to see. Rianne hardly ever displayed any form of strong emotion. Shouting and screaming were things other people did.

"Don't be silly, Ginny. Of course I wouldn't throw a tantrum." An smile of purest evil crept across Rianne's features. "I would maintain a calm and composed exterior then start composing a diabolical scheme to destroy everything of worth and value in their life."

"Speaking of which, what did you get us, Ginny?" Deanna interrupted, with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Ginny's composure disintegrated. "Oh! I didn't think... I mean, I didn't know you two were going to... And I didn't know you that well... Erm..." Inspiration dawned. "Would you like a snake-in-the-box?" she asked hopefully.

Deanna burst out laughing, and even Rianne couldn't help smiling. "Nice recovery." she drawled. "But don't worry. We weren't expecting anything. Keep your snake. Bring it to Christmas dinner with you. Malfoy hasn't seen it yet, has he?"

"No. He hasn't." Deanna said thoughtfully. "Yes, definitely bring it to dinner. But keep it in its box. After all, a thing is far more interesting if kept hidden. I think we could have some fun with this. But enough of this kidding around. I'd better get dressed, I suppose." Deanna slipped out of bed, picked up her clothes and made for the door, presumably to have a shower.

"Why, you going somewhere?" Rianne asked in surprise. It was still relatively early, and Deanna was not one to break with the usual tradition of slobbering out in her pyjamas until noon without a good reason.

"Not really. I'm just nipping out for a bit. I won't be long. There's just someone I need to see."

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In contrast to the fun in the Slytherin dorm, Professor Severus Snape was spending Christmas on his own, watching Corvus trying to get inside a jar of freshly pickled newts' legs.

"I'd give up if I were you." he advised the bird. "They're loaded with security charms and the lids are made of the best clay around. You wouldn't like them anyway."

Corvus gave up his quest and flew back to perch on Severus's shoulder, cawing softly in his ear in an attempt to get round him.

"Cut it out, you." Severus told him. "I've already fed you this morning anyway. You want something else, you go out and hunt it down yourself. No, don't look at me like that. I am not giving in. Look, stop it. No, I don't care if it is Christmas. You are not eating my best Potions ingredients - hello?" He looked up. Someone was knocking on the door. Now that was unusual. He wasn't expecting any of his colleagues to visit, and besides, that didn't sound like a teacher. Far too timid and self-conscious. No, that was a student. So, a Slytherin then. Which one, however, was still a mystery, although Severus suspected that it wasn't one of the boys. Crabbe and Goyle never came to visit him independently, and Malfoy rarely bothered with common courtesies like knocking. Nor, he thought, was it likely to be Rianne Stormosi - the odd mix of self-assurance and deference he'd come to associate with her was missing here. Which just left Ginny and Deanna. And Ginny was hardly likely to come visiting on her own...

"Come in, Miss Tyler." he said, fighting the idiotic grin that was struggling to emerge. The door opened and to his delight, his guess was proved right. Deanna Tyler entered, in awe.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked, amazement turning to annoyance at having been seen through so quickly.

"I have my methods." Severus responded, preserving an aura of mystery that most wise Slytherins develop sooner rather than later. Rule Two of being a successful Slytherin - never reveal one's secrets, and certainly never give a mundane explanation when a magical one could be hinted at. Lifting his wand, he lit the fire. While the chill in the air was something he was by now quite used to, he didn't want Deanna to be uncomfortable. "So, what brings you here? Do you not have presents to unwrap? I know your mother's not the most organised of people but surely not even she could forget Christmas?"

"No, of course not!" Deanna giggled as she slid into a chair, Corvus flying in to land on her shoulder, greeting her affectionately. Deanna didn't know how privileged she was, Severus thought. Corvus was normally extremely distrustful of visitors - indeed, there were only four people other than himself who the raven ever bothered showing any affection to: Caitlin, Deanna, Luella and oddly enough, Draco Malfoy, a not infrequent visitor to Severus's dungeon quarters.

Deanna, unaware of all this, was regaling him with a description of all her new presents. "Mum got me a couple of CDs, although her main present is being sent on separately what with it being huge and all. Lu managed to chase down tickets for

Metallica this summer, don't ask me how, and even more amazingly, she says she'll actually go with me!"

"How kind of her." A pause. "And what might Metallica be?"

"They're a Muggle rock band, sir." Despite the term of respect, Severus found himself for the first time in his life being made to feel inferior by someone younger than him. All of a sudden, he was fully aware that he was thirty eight years old, not getting any younger, and that there was a whole other world out there known as Planet Youth Culture which he knew nothing whatsoever about and probably never would, and what was more, that however much he did manage to glean about it, Deanna Tyler would always know more about it than him. His mood was not helped by the patronising look on Deanna's face which had all the arrogant pity of the kind of look one gave to an elderly relative who was no longer quite in possession of all their faculties. Any minute now he expected her to raise her voice and start saying things like "Are you alright, dear? Had your pills?" before turning away to a non-existent companion to comment about him as if he wasn't there "Got to keep checking up on him - dear old Uncle Sev does have a tendency to forget these things." No, definitely time to change the subject.

"Quite. And what else did your friends see fit to bestow on you this year?"

"Well, Auntie Mel got me some Bond movies on video - reckons they make great Auror training material apparently, especially for the modules on Understanding the Psychology of the Enemy and What Not To Do or How To Apprehend Dark Mages Without Getting Killed."

"She's mentioned them once or twice." Severus mused. "What else?"

"Rianne's got me some very cool goth jewellery, look!" She pulled back the sleeves of her robes to reveal an array of silver and black rings with various motifs all centring around the theme of death in some way, and more wristbands than he'd ever seen on one person before, most of which seemed to have studs on them. Once again, Severus was made painfully aware of the fact that his youth was receding dimly into the past. His only consolation was that as yet, his hairline had yet to do the same.

"Very fetching. Latest fashion, is it?"

"Hardly." Deanna rolled her eyes. "The day Marlie starts wearing this stuff is the day I lose my faith in life, and the day Pansy Parkinson starts is the day I lose the will to live."

"Nevertheless, it does suit you." It was true. Bizarre as it was even by magical standards, it looked good on Deanna. Her naturally pale skin went well with all the black, and it wasn't like she'd ever been the ultra-feminine type. Besides, he rather liked the idea of her having a unique fashion sense. Made her more... special.

"You think so?" Deanna looked sceptical, but pleased all the same.

"I do. I may not be a dedicated follower of fashion, but I do know what looks good. Commend Miss Stormosi on her taste. However, I must inform you now that if you wear them in my lessons, they'll be confiscated. Rings and volatile potions do not mix."

"Will do." Deanna promised. "Then there's Marlie's present. And you'll never believe what she got me."

"Another converted Muggle gadget?"

"No! Not even close! Nothing electrical at all. This present's alive."

Severus couldn't even begin to imagine. "She's not diversified into artificial intelligence, has she?"

"Not yet, not as far as I know. No, she has got me..." Deanna paused for effect. "A Venus Fly-Trap!"

Severus recalled his Herbology NEWT. "Ah yes, the Venus Fly-Trap. Smaller, Muggle-safe version of the Neptunian Sheep-Catcher, a giant carnivorous plant created by an eccentric American Herbologist called Polonius Strange which is found only in a few private collections and the major herbological research institutes and is believed to have inspired the design for the Muggle bear trap. And Miss Lovegood has bought you one."

"Yeah." Deanna grinned. "Rianne and Ginny were feeding beetles to it as I left. Ginny's decided to call it Neville."

"Neville?"

"Yeah, after Longbottom. We think it's meant to be ironic." Deanna paused, doubts creeping in. "We hope it's meant to be ironic, anyway."

"Dumbed down, sanitised and completely harmless version of something that was always meant to be frightening? Yes, I can quite see how that could fit." To this day, Severus had never been able to grasp quite how two talented mages like Frank and Amelia Longbottom could have produced an almost-Squib like Neville. Frank Longbottom had been two years older than Severus, in the same year as Narcissa Harker and Lucius Malfoy, but never their friend. Severus remembered him fondly, as someone who'd always intervened the minute trouble had started and done a lot to protect him and his yearmates from both older Slytherins and from each other. Yes, Frank Longbottom had been easily one of the most popular and respected Slytherins around, so much so that even his marriage to a Hufflepuff had raised not a comment from anyone. Which went a long way towards explaining why the mere sight of Neville Longbottom brought out the worst in him now. Severus often wondered what Frank would think of his son if he were still capable of comprehending the concept. A boy with all the magical ability of a Canadian Tree Slug and, adding insult to injury, a Gryffindor too. Such a disappointment. At least he wasn't a Slytherin. Although maybe he would have fared better there - sharing a dorm with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle would have toughened him up like nothing else.

Enough nostalgia. After all, it wasn't Frank Longbottom's child that concerned him now. He returned his attention to his own.

"So you've now got Neville the Venus Fly-Trap adorning the common room, have you? That'll go well with that cactus of Miss Lovegood's. Is it going to stop there or are you going to acquire a whole greenhouseful of exotic plants named after the denizens of Gryffindor House?"

"Hey, that's an idea!" Deanna seemed quite taken with the concept. "Wonder what sort of plant Ron'd be? Not to mention Harry. I'll give that one to Lu, bet she'd love to have Harry Potter by her bed every night."

Stranded on the other side of the generation gap as he was, Severus had been around teenagers for long enough not to have any trouble deciphering that remark.

"She is not interested in Harry Potter." It was more of a command than a statement. "Who can tell?" Deanna shrugged dramatically. "She doesn't seem to be interested in boys full stop at the moment, and Harry's a bit young for her after all. She's quite fond of him though. Maybe when they're both a little older, eh?" She gave him a conspiratorial wink.

"If you say so, Miss Tyler." Severus's tones indicated that that particular thread of conversation was at an end. Permanently. "So what did you come to see me for, anyway? Is there some kind of problem?"

"Oh no." Deanna reached for her bag, rather glad to change the subject. Silently, she reprimanded herself for being such a fool as to mention Harry Potter. The whole school knew Snape hated him after all. Of course he wouldn't want any of his Slytherins going out with him. Best not to repeat any Potter-related rumours in his hearing. Probably a very good thing that most of the attraction seemed to be on Harry's side - Luella seemed to have a very laissez-faire attitude to romance of any description. However, that wasn't what she was here for, was it?

"Seeing as you got me such a cool present last year - Nesta's keeping well, by the way - I thought I'd return the favour. Here you go." She presented him with a small black box.

Severus took it from her cautiously, hardly daring to believe his eyes. Deanna Tyler, caring enough to get him a Christmas present? A wonder indeed.

He flipped open the box. There, glimmering in the fire-light, was a silver and jet pendant in the shape of a raven with its wings outstretched, strung onto a silver chain. He held it up, watching it gleam, iridescent as the flames illuminated the flawless black surface, marvelling at the craftsmanship involved and the sheer perfection of it.

"Well? Do you like it?" Deanna asked breathlessly, gripped by a sudden fear that he'd hate it, that he'd fling it back in her face and laugh, or worse, hand it gently back while explaining that he couldn't accept gifts from students, crushing her nascent fantasies of being special to him, of being more than just another student in his eyes.

He didn't answer immediately, still staring at it in silent awe as it turned this way and that.

"It's beautiful." he whispered, unable to take his eyes off it. Finally, he tore his gaze away and replaced it in its box. "Deanna, this must have cost you a fortune." Adoration had shifted into emotions that were far less pleasant.

"Well, not really, sir. I mean, I'd got quite a bit saved up. And Mum's always been quite generous with pocket money." There was also the fact that the Snape Sweepstake had proved to be a most profitable venture indeed, but Deanna decided not to mention that.

"Be that as it may, I don't know if I can accept this. It's far too valuable - people will think you're trying to bribe me." A pause and a searching stare. "You're not, are you?"

"No of course not, sir." Deanna felt her heart sink. She was just another student to him after all. All those times she thought she'd seen him watching her with a smile, all those times he'd advised her, comforted her, been proud of her, they meant nothing. She was just another Slytherin, just another part of his job.

He was still gazing at the raven necklace as if in a trance. "But it is very beautiful." Tearing his eyes away, Severus came face to face with Corvus, who was looking at him in a silent reproach that said more than words ever could.

"Don't look at me like that!" he snapped at the bird. *"I can't take gifts off students, you know that!"*

"What was that, sir?" Deanna asked, confused. Of course - she couldn't understand the language of birds, could she?

"Not you. Him." He indicated the raven, whose expression had not changed in the slightest. *"Corvus, will you stop that right now!"*

"Dear oh dear, Severus." the bird chanted. *"So cruel and to your own fledgling too. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."*

Severus gritted his teeth. *"It's the right thing to do. She doesn't know I'm her father, I can't be seen to be favouring her!"*

"That's never stopped you before!" Corvus returned.

"You're talking to your raven!" said Deanna, enthralled. "What are you saying?"

"Doesn't matter." snapped Severus, irritation making him brusque. *"Corvus, I'm warning you..."*

"Look at her." the raven continued. *"See how miserable you've made her. See how upset she is. You could change that, you know. One word from you could make her day."*

"*Corvus, shut up!*" hissed Severus. The bird was not to be put off.

"And on Christmas Day, too. You've really ruined her Christmas now, you realise that? Everyone else celebrating and she'll be sat there with that necklace in her hands all depressed, just because you were too high and mighty to accept a tiny little token of appreciation off her."

Severus gave in. Corvus was obviously not going to let the matter drop, and the last thing he needed was him flying after him all day, constantly reminding him of how miserable Deanna now was because of him. Christmas was enough torture as it was without that. Besides, despite all his principles, there was nothing he wanted more than to see Deanna happy.

He retrieved the necklace from its box and tapped it with his wand. It flew into the air, settled around his neck and fastened itself shut. "I think I shall keep it after all. It would be churlish of me to refuse such a well-meant gift. Thank you."

He watched as Deanna blinked in surprise, transformed from awkward teenager into a beauty of the future by that smile Severus lived for.

"Really? You like it? I mean, you're going to keep it? Oh, thank you!"

Dazzling. Simply dazzling, Severus thought, idly fingering the chain. Caitlin, for bringing such a wonderful young lady into this world, I will never cease to thank you.

"Well, I don't get given things like this every day. I don't think it will be a problem, as long as we keep it quiet that it was from you. I won't wear it too openly, but we'll both know it's there and that's the main thing. You have excellent taste, Deanna."

Deanna blushed, staring at her feet in a most uncharacteristic manner. "Well, I knew you liked ravens and all."

"Sometimes." said Severus, shooting a venomous glance at Corvus, who was now doing his best to look as smug as someone without the ability to grin could. "*Happy now, trouble?*"

"*Perfectly, Severus.*" Corvus replied, sounding rather too innocent for his own good. "*And so is she, by the look of things. Well done, I knew you'd see sense in the end.*"

"*Oh, shut up.*" Severus told him. He returned his attention to Deanna. "Just one thing. Why did you get this for me? I'm only your teacher after all, not that I'm not pleased or anything."

Deanna paused, seeming a little nervous. However, gathering her courage, she decided to tell him.

"Just that you've always been there for me ever since I started here, whenever I've needed you, whenever I've been upset. And for most of that time, I've repaid you by criticising your subject, deliberately putting it at the bottom of my list of priorities, badmouthing you to my friends and generally taking you for granted. Anyway, I did

some thinking over the summer and realised that it was about time I showed some gratitude. So I've been working hard at your lessons, stopped talking about you behind your back, made an effort to be nice to your face and generally been behaving myself. And when I saw that in Hogsmeade, I just had to get it. Besides," and here Deanna's nervousness really became apparent, "you always seem so lonely and miserable at this time of year. I thought you could do with cheering up."

"Well, it worked." said Severus, too pleased that he'd won her over to care that she'd seen through his facade. "I'm very pleased with it, thank you! I'm also pleased you're finally doing yourself justice in Potions - you have no idea how painful it was to see an obviously bright girl like you getting such mediocre grades. But don't excel for my sake. Do it for yourself. Succeed on your own terms, not for anyone else."

"Always the teacher, aren't you?" Deanna remarked. "I thought you'd just be relieved I was finally doing well."

"See it as a tribute to your sparkling personality that I'm able to put aside my usual cynicism when dealing with you." Severus replied. "Besides," and here his mood turned sombre, "you might not always think as highly of me as you do now. I wouldn't want your studies to suffer just because your sense of gratitude has worn off." Or for any other reason, Severus thought, trying not to picture the one thing that would turn Deanna against him like nothing else.

"I wouldn't worry about it, sir." Deanna said airily, blissfully unaware of Severus's thoughts. "Once I've decided I like someone, they'd have to do something pretty bad to get me to hate them. Something very bad indeed."

Severus could only smile weakly. Smile, and pray wholeheartedly that Deanna never found out exactly what he'd done that been so very, very bad.

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A few hours later, and Christmas dinner was underway. Fred and George had raced over to give their sister a hug the minute she'd walked in, heaping copious greetings on her before offering to shake her hand.

Ginny reached out to take the hand of her nearest brother, Fred. At least, she did until Rianne stopped her.

"Don't even think about it, Ginny."

"Why not?" Ginny asked in surprise. "They're my own brothers."

"Exactly." said Rianne, ever wary. "Who knows what they could be up to?"

"Yeah, Gin, those two are the original pranksters and no mistake." Deanna put in. "Do not trust them, especially and I do mean ESPECIALLY when they're smiling like that. It usually means trouble."

Fred and George both pulled their sympathy-seeking looks. "They don't trust us."

"No, Fred, they don't. Not even our darling little sister."

Ginny bit her lip, eyes darting from the two Slytherins to her brothers, clearly having no idea what to do or who to believe. Rianne, seeing that Ginny was wavering, decided to step in.

"Don't listen to them, Ginny. They're trying to manipulate your good nature."

"They're better at it than us sometimes." Deanna piped up. "Anyone would think they were the Slytherins."

"Gods forbid!" laughed Fred. "But come on, Ginny, surely just one handshake for your big brothers, eh?" He held out his hand once more, a smile of purest innocence on his face.

Ginny looked around and decided to take the plunge. After all, they were her brothers and despite what Deanna and Rianne might say, she was sure they wouldn't hurt her. She shook his hand. And screamed.

She let go at once. "Fred Weasley, you little git, what did you just do?" she yelled at him, clutching her hand. "I'll tell Mum!"

The twins were falling about laughing. Fred held up a small grey object that looked a bit like a pebble.

"It's an electric buzzer! Delivers a mild magical charge whenever you shake hands with someone. It's a brilliant toy, Ron's fallen for it three times already this morning. Courtesy of Marlie Lovegood."

"There's a surprise." Rianne commented.

"So she's talking to you again, is she?" The last thing Deanna had heard, Marlie had been refusing to even acknowledge the twins' existence.

"Yeah." grinned Fred. "Saw us buying Ginny's present on the last Hogsmeade weekend of term, asked who it was for, and forgave us immediately when we told her."

"Immediately?" George raised an eyebrow. "I seem to remember her being all sarcastic and smug at us, extracting loads of apologies and an admission that we'd been in the wrong the whole time and Slytherins weren't so bad after all. Then her deigning to forgive us finally after we'd finished humiliating ourselves in front of the whole of Zonko's. Including that bloody Lucas Vetinari and his mates."

"Hey!" snapped Rianne. "You leave Lucas alone."

"Rianne fancies him." Deanna explained.

"Deanna, shut up."

The twins had been about to embark on a major teasing spree but the look on Rianne's face stopped them. That look could shatter stained glass windows. In another country. No one argued with Rianne when she had that look on her face.

"So, Ginny." said George, changing the subject. "Did you like your present?"

Ginny nodded. "Brilliant!"

"Knew you'd like it." grinned Fred. "We thought it was appropriate. It's a King Cobra, don't you know."

"Funnily enough," said Deanna, a mischievous gleam in her eyes, "that was what me and Rianne said when she first opened it. Well, to put it more precisely, our exact words were 'Jesus Christ, it's a ***king cobra', but it's close enough."

The twins burst out laughing, and even Rianne couldn't help grinning, although it was quickly suppressed.

"Tyler, I hope you've not been teaching our baby sister foul language." said Fred, trying to look disapproving, without success.

"Course not." laughed Deanna. "Although we've learnt quite a few new words off her, it's been quite surprising."

Ginny blushed furiously at this, the colour clashing violently with her hair. "Stop it!" she squeaked, outraged. Deanna laughed.

"See, she's telling me off already! Well done, Gin, you just passed your first test. Come on, let's go have dinner. See you boys around!"

The twins departed to try their new buzzer toy on yet another unsuspecting victim. Far away on the other side of the Great Hall, voices drifted across from the Gryffindor table.

"Go on, Ron, shake hands!"

"No way! I'm not falling for that again!"

"Oh look, Ron, we're sorry. Really!"

"Oh really. Sorry, but I still don't trust you two."

"Look, we're sorry, we really are. We won't do it again."

"Hmm. Promise?"

"We swear to every god there is. Promise!"

"Well... alright then."

"Brilliant! Thanks, Ron! Shake on it?"

"Oh go on then." A pause. Then...

"AAAAGGHHHH!!!! YOU GITS!!! YOU PROMISED!!!!"

"YES!!! Four times in one morning! Result!"

The three Slytherins shook their heads, grinning. It had always been like that in the Weasley household. Ron's gullibility when faced with his brothers' pranks was legendary even among Slytherins, and was the primary reason why Draco liked teasing him.

Christmas dinner passed without event. Ginny's snake-in-the-box attracted plenty of inquisitive looks, but other than that, nothing out of the ordinary really happened. At the end of the main course, Draco, curiosity finally getting the better of him, made his way over to where Deanna was sitting.

"So, Tyler. What's in the box?" There was, after all, nothing on the outside to indicate what the contents were.

"That's for me to know and you not to." Deanna snapped back.

"Now, now, Tyler. That's not very Christmassy is it? Christmas, after all, is a time for giving and sharing. And I think you should give me that box." He reached out to open the catch.

Rianne, however, was quicker. One charm later and Draco was leaping back, clutching his hand in pain.

"Leave it, Malfoy. It's not yours. It's Ginny's. A present from her brothers." A twinkle came into Rianne's eyes, the kind of devilish twinkle that meant she was up to something. "A very valuable present from her brothers. One that she'd hate anyone else to mess around with or touch. Means a lot to her, you know."

Ginny might not have been a Slytherin that long, but the mentoring she'd received from Deanna and Rianne had not been lost on her.

"They saved up for months to buy me that." she lisped, peeking up at Draco through her eyelashes, putting on her best little-girl-lost look. "It's my favourite present too. I don't know what I'd do if it got broken or pinched. They'd never forgive me."

"Too bad." laughed Draco as he reached out for it again. Or tried to. Deanna had one hand clamped over his wrist before he could do anything.

"Malfoy. Tamper with that present and you will be very, very sorry."

"Alright, alright." Draco snarled. "Keep the bloody thing. Probably worthless anyway." He withdrew, resentful but at the same time full aware that it wouldn't be a good idea to try anything right now, not with both Deanna and Rianne ready to act,

not to mention a table full of teachers not far away. Later though... He slunk off, the germs of a plan coming together.

"Nice one, you two." murmured Deanna, watching him go. "You've just changed mere curiosity into obsession. He'll do anything to get at that box now, just you watch."

"He's so easy to manipulate sometimes." Rianne mused. "You wouldn't guess he's a Slytherin."

"You would." said Ginny, with a firmness that surprised both her companions.

"Been watching him, have you?" laughed Deanna.

"He's a Malfoy." Ginny replied. "Dad reckons they're all conniving manipulative scumbags, although not in those words."

"Smart man, Arthur Weasley." remarked Rianne. "Very smart man indeed."

Dessert came to an end, and the Great Hall began to empty as people slowly began the arduous task of dragging themselves back to their common rooms after stuffing themselves full of the delicious fare that made up Hogwarts Christmas Dinner.

"Now what?" Ginny whispered, shooting surreptitious glances in the direction of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle.

Rianne and Deanna leaned in that bit closer to do some serious plotting.

"Malfoy won't attack you with the two of us here, that's for certain." murmured Deanna.

"So it's probably best if you leave on your own *avec* box and wait for him to follow you. We'll track him after he leaves and intervene in case of any reprisals. Plus we want to watch."

With that agreed, all three of them leant back. Ginny picked up her box and announced in a loud voice that she sure was worn out, not to mention full.

"All the more for us then, our kid." Deanna replied, equally loudly, eyeing up the remains of a chocolate gateau.

"Yeah, I love this Hogwarts food. Could stay here for hours. Go on then, Ginny, off you go. We'll catch up with you later." Rianne told her.

"OK then. See you guys." said Ginny in a voice she hoped wasn't too fake and headed out.

Draco noticed immediately and began nudging Crabbe. "Look, you two! She's on her own! Now's our chance to find out what's so precious about that box of hers!"

"Do we have to?" whined Goyle.

"Yeah, we're not really that bothered about it, Malfoy." grunted Crabbe as he helped himself to some more plum pudding.

"Do you mean to tell me you're more interested in stuffing your faces full of treacle tart and plum pudding than tormenting Weasley?" demanded Draco in fury.

"Erm... well... if you put it like that... yeah." Goyle admitted.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" asked Crabbe, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Scared? You don't need our help to deal with one little first year, surely?"

"No, of course not." snapped Draco, trying not to sound rattled. "Alright, if you two want to pig out, fine. I'll go on my own." And with that, he stormed out.

Deanna and Rianne watched in satisfaction. "Too easy. Just too easy." breathed Deanna.

"Isn't it." Rianne agreed. "Come on, let's go. I wouldn't miss this for the world."

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Just as Rianne and Deanna had predicted, Draco wasted no time in collaring Ginny. He was on her before she'd even left the Entrance Hall.

"Afternoon, Weasel. Feeling a little more sociable now?"

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Ginny snapped at him. Now that she was alone with him, with Deanna and Rianne nowhere in sight, she felt her earlier bravado begin to waver.

"Want? Why, a look in that little treasure chest, of course! Don't be shy, Weasley. We're housemates, aren't we?"

Ginny was not fooled by the smile. "Nothing doing. I'm not letting you anywhere near it."

"Ah, now that's a shame." Draco pouted, running a finger down the terrified girl's face. Deanna, where are you? she thought, her eyes darting towards the door. Draco was still speaking. "Because I like you, Weasel, I really do, and I'd hoped to do this the civilised way. However, if you're going to be difficult about it..." He made a grab for the box and tried to snatch it out of her hands.

"No!" Ginny yelled as she fought for it. "It's mine, leave it alone!" She shot another glance at the door to the Great Hall, and this time she was in luck. Deanna and Rianne were watching, wands out and knowing grins on their faces. Even better than that, though, was the presence of Fred and George behind them, also armed and ready.

With the knowledge that her older brothers and her Slytherin mentors were ready to jump in as soon as needed, Ginny felt her confidence return. With one final effort to at least make it halfway convincing, she let him snatch it out of her hands.

"And now, Weasel, we shall see exactly what's so valuable I'm not allowed to see it." Draco gloated as he reached for the catch.

"Hold it right there." Deanna's voice rang out, halting Draco in his tracks. "Leave Ginny alone."

"Not you again." snapped Draco. "Honestly, it's like being the bad guy in a bloody Scooby Doo cartoon with you around. I feel like my next line should be 'Drat! I would have got away with it if it hadn't been for you pesky kids.'" He turned around. Deanna had stormed into the room and was now standing there, feet apart, wand pointed at him in the position beloved of law enforcement types everywhere.

"Well, this pesky kid's currently calling a halt to things. Malfoy, give Ginny her present back."

Draco drew his own wand and got up, turning to face her with his usual humility. "Make me."

"Malfoy, I'm warning you. Give Ginny back her present or you'll be sorry. Very sorry." There was menace in her voice, but when Ginny caught her eye, she could have sworn she saw the ghost of a smile flicker around her lips.

"And what if I decide not to?" Draco taunted her. "What if I decide I'm going to open it anyway? What are you going to do then?"

"Put it this way," said Deanna, turning to grin at Rianne and the twins, who were all now grinning in anticipation, like lions watching the fat idiot tourist who insists on getting out of the people-carrier to have his photo taken with them despite his wife's horrified pleas because after all they're only bigger versions of little Tiddles at home, "if you so much as lift the lid of that box, you'll regret it. Big time."

Draco just laughed. "Do your worst, Tyler."

To his surprise, Deanna didn't react. She just shrugged, tucked her wand in her robes and stood back, arms folded. "OK. OK, have it your way. Go ahead and open it. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

Now Draco may not have known what was going to happen, but he was still a Slytherin and by no means a stupid one. And this apparent, sudden and very out of character indifference of Deanna's was not a good sign. Draco looked at the box again. It occurred to him maybe Deanna hadn't been talking about anything she was going to do to him. It also occurred to him that although Ginny had said it was a present from her brothers, she hadn't said which ones...

"You know, all of a sudden, I'm not really that bothered. It's only a box after all. Ginny can have it back if she wants. Here you are, Ginny." He handed the box back.

And was even more disconcerted to see Ginny step back and look at Deanna, as if seeking advice on what to do.

It was Rianne who broke the impasse.

"Bored? Already? What, not curious at all? Not like you, Malfoy. Not like you at all." She stepped into the room, a steely glint in her eyes. "You're not... scared, are you?"

"Scared?" Draco's caution evaporated. No one called a Malfoy frightened. No one. "Of course I'm not scared!"

"Oh good." smiled Rianne. "Because I'm sure the rest of the Slytherin common room would be very disappointed to hear that Draco Malfoy isn't quite as dashing and daring as he's made out to be. Crabbe and Goyle for example. I expect they'd be most unhappy to discover that Draco Malfoy is in fact a great big wuss."

"I am not a wuss!" yelled Draco.

Deanna took up the thread next. "Then there's Pansy Parkinson. She thinks the world of you, you know. You wouldn't want to shatter her illusions, would you? Poor girl. There she is, thinking you're a big, strong boy and all the time you're really a craven coward. You know, for the first time in my life, I actually feel sorry for her."

"I am not a coward!"

"Oh no? Prove it." Deanna leered at him, putting him on the spot in the same way which he had done to countless others before, but had never yet faced himself. And now Draco was beginning to wonder if perhaps being so belligerent when on his own was such a good idea.

Fred and George, not to be outdone, made their own entrances. "What's this? Draco Malfoy being a coward? Bet the other Gryffindors'll love to hear that. He's not that popular up in Gryffindor Tower, is he Fred?"

"No he is not, George. Harry and Ron, for example. They can't stand him. I bet they'd love to hear how the Great Draco is scared of a little girl's Christmas present, wouldn't they?"

"Indubitably, Fred."

"I... am... not... SCARED!" screamed Draco, unable to handle the thought of Ron Weasley, of all people, laughing at him.

"Not scared? OK. Open the present then." Fred was now standing alongside Deanna, arms folded in the same air of expectation.

"Yeah, go on, Malfoy. We're waiting." George took up position on Deanna's other side.

Draco looked from the three fourth years, to Ginny, now staring up at him with the curiosity of a five year old expecting a treat, all her previous fear gone, to Rianne, leaning back against the far wall, watching him with a small yet terrifying smile on her face. Then to the box, sitting innocuously enough on the floor, awaiting his attentions.

Steeling himself, Draco knelt down in front of it. After all, it was only Ginny's Christmas present. What could possibly be dangerous about it? Reaching out, he undid the catch.

And fell back screaming.

"Flamin' Hades! What is that?" he shouted, propping himself up on one elbow, gazing in horror at the giant snake that had leapt out at him.

"It's a King Cobra." grinned Rianne, the only one to maintain any composure as Deanna and the three Weasleys had burst out laughing.

"Biggest ***king cobra I've ever seen in my life!" gasped Draco, hauling himself to his feet. He dusted himself down and spent a few minutes regaining his composure. And became aware of two things. Firstly, that the giant snake was in fact made of paper and cardboard and mounted on a spring, held together by magic and copious amounts of Spellotape. And secondly, that everyone in the room, without exception, was laughing at him.

"You bastards. You complete and utter bastards!" Draco fumed at them. "You knew, didn't you!"

"Course we did, Malfoy." sniggered Fred. "Who do you think bought it?"

"I hate you lot." Draco shot glares at all five of them, with no effect. Well, technically they weren't completely without effect; after all, they did cause the recipients to laugh even harder. However, that hadn't quite been what he'd been aiming at. So Draco fell back on what he usually did when threats didn't work. Sulking.

"I'm going back the common room. I shall deal with you lot later. This did not happen. I am unaffected. There was no snake-in-the-box. It was all a hallucination. Goodbye." And with that, he turned on his heel and was gone.

The silence which greeted this little speech soon descended into giggles once more, as even Rianne couldn't help bursting out laughing.

"Oh man." gasped Deanna, wiping tears from her eyes. "How perfect was that? Are we the masters or what?"

"Deanna Tyler, you rule." choked Fred. "And you, Rianne Stormosi, are undoubtedly the Queen of, well, everything."

"Thank you." Rianne bowed briefly. "As a mark of gratitude, you boys can be the Princes of Prankdom in my little Empire. Deanna's already Grand Vizier though."

"What about me?" Ginny piped up. Her brothers immediately ran to her side and prostrated themselves before her.

"You, wonderful little sister, can be the Crown Princess and Heir Apparent." said Fred.

"Couldn't have put it better myself. Gin, you were great! That was brilliant! We couldn't have done it better ourselves, certainly not at your age. We take our hats off to you." George bowed to her.

"Tell you what though." Fred nudged his twin. "This having a Slytherin in the family, it's not bad, is it? We could do with someone who's nice and devious, yet also able to put on a convincing facade of trustworthiness and innocence. We can't do that, you see. For some reason, Mum thinks we're always up to something."

"That's because you are." Deanna pointed out.

"Well, yes, but that's not the point." George explained. "Point is, no one in our family trusts us anymore. Apart from Ron, but that's different, he'll fall for anything. Ginny, on the other hand, is the darling of everybody's eye, everybody's favourite Weasley and far too nice to get up to anything. And she's got the cutesy charm to keep it that way. Haven't you Gin?" Ginny nodded enthusiastically.

"So what do you say, sis? Fancy being our little partner in crime? Slytherin cunning and manipulation mixed with Gryffindor nerve and daring?"

"Go on then!" giggled Ginny, shaking hands with both her brothers in turn as they got to their feet.

"And with that, fair Slytherin ladies, we must take our leave of you." Fred bowed to the three of them as he headed for the stairs.

"Goodbye and farewell. Who knows when we five shall meet again? But until then, au revoir!" George bowed even more extravagantly than his brother, blew Deanna a kiss and chased after his brother.

"Look at them. Professional idiots, the both of them." Rianne shook her head as the twins left.

"But they're entertaining idiots. And that's the important thing. Shall we go?" She turned to leave, then stopped, her attention caught by something next to the dungeon entrance, something Draco had not noticed in his haste to leave. There on a small table were two large, round, tasty chocolate cakes. "Hey! Chocolate cake!"

"Chocolate cake? Where?" Ginny raced over to the table and joined Deanna in ogling the cakes. "Hmm, they look nice. Can I have a bit? Can I?"

"As long as you leave enough for me." said Deanna, reaching for the knife that had been so thoughtfully provided by whoever had left them there.

She was about to cut a slice when a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"What the hell do you two think you're doing?" thundered Rianne. Ginny withdrew her hand immediately.

"Eating." replied Deanna, used to Rianne's authoritative voice.

"You will not." snapped Rianne, taking the knife off her. "Two chocolate cakes which just happen to be left lying around for anyone to help themselves to, and you're seriously going to eat them?"

"Yeah." Deanna stepped back, defensive.

Rianne threw up her hands in frustration. "Deanna Tyler, what kind of Slytherin are you? Think, woman! Who, in a building full of teenagers, leaves chocolate cake lying around without an armed guard?"

"Someone who wants it to get eaten?" Deanna suggested.

"Exactly. And give me one good reason why anyone would want *someone else* to eat chocolate cake."

Deanna thought. Altruism could be safely ruled out - no one gave chocolate cake away for nothing. And she was too much the Slytherin to come up with a benign reason.

"They're planning a diabolical scheme."

"Precisely. And whatever it is, do you want to end up as one of the victims? No, I don't think so. Whatever they're planning, we're best off out of it. Come on, you two." She hauled them off towards the common room, leaving the two cakes uneaten behind them.

Breathing sighs of relief, Harry and Ron emerged from behind the suit of armour that had been shielding them.

"Thank Rianne for that!" Harry breathed. "I thought we were going to have to impersonate Ginny and Deanna for a minute there! Bet Malfoy would have loved to spill his secrets to them. Not."

Ron didn't answer. He was too busy glaring at the door the girls had just left by.

"Oh gods, not again." Harry sighed. "Ron. Ron!" He shook Ron's shoulder. "RON!"

Ron started. "Blimey, Harry, no need to shout. I heard you the first time."

"Well answer me the first time then! Snap out of it, mate. What's up, as if I can't guess. Ginny, I suppose."

"Partly. But more my brothers. Fred and George. Did you see them, Harry? 'Oh Ginny, aren't you great? Ginny, aren't you lovely? Ginny, you can be the Crown Princess. Isn't it wonderful having a Slytherin in the family?' No it isn't! It isn't bloody

wonderful, and our family'll never be the same again!" Ron was clenching his fists in rage, glaring down the dungeon corridor. "They don't get it, do they? They just don't get it. It's not cool or fun, or anything like that, and it's not some way of helping them get even better at practical jokes than they already are! Ginny's a Slytherin. She's not one of us anymore. She's one of the enemy. One of them. She's already changing. The Ginny of old wouldn't have been able to con Malfoy like that. She wouldn't have known how. He'd have seen right through her and she'd probably have been too scared to try anyhow. Not any more. She's as good as he is."

It occurred to Harry that if the Ginny of old would have quailed at the mere sight of Malfoy, then he rather preferred Ginny the Slyth. Anyone who could stitch up Malfoy like that couldn't be all bad.

"And you mean to tell me you weren't laughing at Malfoy too? Come on, that was a brilliant bit of pranking, you have to admit."

"Well yeah." muttered Ron. "But she's still a Slytherin."

"Oh so it's alright when you get one over Malfoy, but when a Slytherin does it..." His voice trailed off as he suddenly realised what this was really about. "Bloody hell, Ron, you don't mean to tell me you're jealous, do you?"

"No." snapped Ron. But it was not a convincing no.

"That's it, isn't it?" laughed Harry. "You're jealous because they're better at humiliating Malfoy than you! Because they're better at manipulating him, and at coming up with the smart remarks and witty put-downs, and he's a lot more scared of them than he is of you. That's it, isn't it?"

"No!" yelled Ron. But he was blushing.

"It all makes sense now." mused Harry. "Back in Diagon Alley, when Malfoy was taunting you and you let fly at him. Who was it got you out of trouble then? Deanna and Luella, who beat him at his own game and sent him scurrying back to his dad. You spent the entire journey home complaining about how you didn't need help from Slytherins and how you could have sorted Malfoy out on your own. Why did we never see it before? You're jealous! Especially now that your little sister's one and in the space of three months is better at tricking Malfoy than you are."

"I AM NOT JEALOUS OF GINNY!!" Ron shouted. "Or Tyler. Or Martin. Or ANY of the Slytherins! They're scumbags, all of them! And I definitely don't want to be one!"

"So you're backing out of the plan then."

"No."

"Oh good. For a moment there I thought you'd gone off the idea of being Goyle."

"Hey now, look, I never said I wanted to be Goyle." Ron shuddered. "Let's face it, who would? But I want to do it, just to see their common room if nothing else. Fred reckons Lovegood's done it up like a Seventies nightclub."

"Can't imagine." grinned Harry. "But enough talking. They're coming." He dragged Ron back into hiding and together the two of them watched as Crabbe and Goyle marched in. They noticed the cakes almost immediately. Rubbing their hands with glee and pointing, the two of them started munching away. The Sleeping Potion took effect in seconds, as their eyes glazed over and still with the same expressions on their faces, they keeled over.

The boys rushed out to seize their prey. Harry swiftly removed some hair from each of them and pocketed it.

"Right, that's that done. Now to hide them."

Ron pointed to a nearby cupboard. "How about in there?"

"Brilliant."

Stopping merely to borrow Crabbe and Goyle's shoes, they heaved the unconscious Slytherins into the cupboard and locked it. Then, before anyone could find them, they grabbed the cakes and ran off, phase one of their plan successfully completed.

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Chapter Thirteen Plots and Polyjuice

As Harry and Ron were abducting Crabbe and Goyle, the Slytherin girls were returning to the Serpents' Nest, where Draco was kneeling in front of the fire, examining a large rectangular crate that hadn't been there that morning.

"Malfoy, do you never learn?" called Rianne. "I thought we'd proved to your satisfaction that it's not a good idea to go poking around in other people's parcels."

"Shut up." snarled Draco, his eyes not leaving the crate. He turned to Deanna. "It's addressed to you."

"Thought it might be. Excuse me, Malfoy." Deanna pushed him aside and reached for her wand, before deftly tapping out the intro from Enter Sandman on the lid.

"It's the standard Tyler security system." Rianne explained to Ginny. "Caitlin reckons the usual methods are too easy to crack, so she uses excerpts from Muggle rock tunes as combinations that have to be tapped out with a wand of the same specification as the recipient's. Not only that, the ones she sends to Deanna have to be done left-handed. You would be amazed at how difficult it actually is to crack."

Ginny watched dumbstruck as the lid opened out, causing a golden light to blaze out of the crate. And then the most amazing sight of all - seven brooms rising out of it, gleaming in the supernatural radiance, sleek, shining, inhuman. Hard to believe they were made of wood. Hard to believe they were there at all - they seemed almost wraithlike. Ginny had never seen anything like them in her life. These were the brooms of professionals. The Harley Davidsons of the broomstick world. The sort of broom her family could only dream of buying.

"They're beautiful!" she heard herself whisper.

"They're Firebolts." Deanna answered, in tones combining awe and pride. "Courtesy of Clearwater and Pearce Aeronautics Ltd. Rigel Clearwater's older brother Patrick's an Auror, and Mum rescued him once, so the entire family thinks she's wonderful. So they sold her these at a massive discount. They're said to be the fastest broom anywhere although they're not due for launch until the summer. And now they're ours, all ours!" She was gazing at the brooms in supreme satisfaction, basking in the reflected glory, like a devotee finally granted a glimpse of the Deity, like the prodigal child coming home.

Draco, for once in his life speechless, joined her. For a while, neither said anything, lost as they were in admiring the brooms. Finally, he spoke.

"They're beautiful. I don't suppose there's any chance... I mean, you wouldn't... I couldn't... Is there any way I could just, you know, hold one? Just for a bit. You can have it straight back and all, I won't break it or sabotage it or anything, promise! Please?"

Deanna turned to look at him. And blinked. It was the first time, the very first time, she'd seen Draco without the sneer. He was staring at the brooms like a child staring in a sweet shop window, the light making him almost glow. Shorn of the usual arrogance, he looked innocent, wistful, even cute. Deanna couldn't help smiling. If only Crabbe and Goyle could have seen this.

"OK." she heard herself saying. "OK, you can hold one. Just for a little while, mind." She reached out and plucked one out of the air. The light died immediately. Draco took it from her, placing it lovingly over his knee, stroking the handle with a tenderness Deanna hadn't known he was capable of.

"Gorgeous!" he breathed, taking in every nuance, every fine detail. Coated in silver, the broom had been crafted with the care and attention of a master. On one side of the handle, engraved in fine red lettering, was the word "Firebolt". And on the other, next to the finger grips, this time in green, were the words "Marlie Lovegood, Seeker".

"You got them personalised too?" Draco could only shake his head in amazement at the lengths Deanna had gone to.

"Oh yeah. These are going to each member of the Slytherin reserves." Deanna told him. "We sent the heights, weights, build, sidedness and position of each of us off and the brooms have been customised accordingly. Wonderful, aren't they?"

"Amazing." Draco handed the broom back. "Thank you." he whispered.

"No worries." replied Deanna, packing the brooms away again. "Everyone's going to want to admire them at some point, so we might as well start now and get it over with. Tell you what, I can't wait to see the other houses' faces when we roll up with these little beauties. We cannot possibly fail with these! The reserve trophy's ours!"

"That I don't doubt for a second." Draco was still gazing longingly at the Firebolts. "It would be almost worth letting Marls have her old job back just so I could ride one of those."

"I'll tell her you said that, she will be pleased." Deanna grinned. However, something about that last sentence of Draco's had bothered her. Something about it wasn't right. Something strange about it...

Draco, meanwhile, had returned to his usual sarcastic self, the moment of vulnerability over. "Tyler, note the use of the word 'almost' here. Better riding a Nimbus in the first team than a Firebolt in the reserves, if you ask me."

That was it! Deanna realised in a flash, inspired by him calling her Tyler. He'd called Marlie by her first name. In fact, not even her first name. He'd called her Marls. Something which no one other than her dorm mates and brother did. And something that Malfoy never did. At least, not until now.

"Malfoy," she began, "why did you refer to your cousin as Marls?"

There! He'd frozen, just for an instant. However, Slytherin that he was, he recovered his composure virtually immediately.

"Because it's her name."

"No. It's the nickname of the nickname, reserved for close friends and family only. Just explain why you've gone from Lovegood to Marls in the space of twenty minutes, would you?" Deanna fixed him with a gaze that let him know in no uncertain terms that he was not going to get away without explaining himself.

Draco got to his feet, summoning every inch of dignity he could find. Remember you're a Malfoy, he told himself, trying to ignore the little voice in his head that was chanting yeah, but she's a Tal-y-Rhys...

"Remember, Tyler, that I am also her family." he drawled. "And if I decide to use her nickname, that's my affair." Desperate to get away from the glare Deanna was giving him, he decided that a retreat in search of reinforcements was called for. "Where are Crabbe and Goyle, I wonder. Still stuffing themselves, I don't doubt. Better go and retrieve them, I suppose. I shall return." And with that, he strode out. Reaching the safety of the corridor, he stopped to let out the breath he'd been holding ever since that heartstopping moment when he'd realised Deanna had rumbled him. Draco, you fool! he told himself. It wouldn't do at all for it to get out just how friendly he and Marlie actually were. Already his friends were commenting on how much he seemed to know about Muggles all of a sudden. Last thing he wanted was for it to get back to his father, who would certainly not be pleased to hear that his only son had been playing computer games, wearing jeans, listening to the latest pop tunes and horror of horrors, spending inordinate amounts of time in Exeter Odeon. Bad things happened when his father wasn't pleased, although his mother had usually managed to prevent anything really awful happening to him. No, definitely time to start defusing the rumours. Which meant a concerted effort at Muggle-bashing and Mudblood-baiting. Heading off in search of Crabbe and Goyle, he smiled grimly to himself. Never mind the Heir of Slytherin, the Heir of Malfoy was what the Muggle-lovers of Hogwarts really ought to be scared of.

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"OK, someone tell me what's up with him?" Deanna asked, unable to work Draco out at all. How did someone go from sarcastic to vulnerable to defensive then back to sarcastic and dignified again? It wasn't natural. And what was up with him and Marlie?

"Well, Tyler, there are various theories that could account for why Malfoy's gone weird on us." Rianne drawled. "However, I think the most likely is that he's male."

"You don't say."

"What's that got to do with it?" Ginny asked, eyes darting from one to the other. Deanna and Rianne gave each other condescending are-you-going-to-tell-her-or-am-I looks. It was Rianne who took up the challenge.

"Because, Ginny dear, you'll find as you get older that men are touchy creatures indeed, more so than Deanna here, in fact. And they absolutely hate being made fools of, caught out, or being seen to display any kind of weakness whatsoever. When it does happen, instead of dealing with it calmly and rationally, they revert to being three years old and throwing tantrums. As we have seen twice now today with darling Drakie-wakie."

"But that doesn't explain why he seemed so, well, nice when I was showing him the brooms." whispered Deanna, lost in thought.

Ginny, however, was beginning to have ideas. "Maybe he likes you, Deanna!" she began to giggle.

At this, Deanna's confusion vanished as a mask of cold, hard, fury slammed down across her face. "He had better bloody not, or I will personally make sure he spends the rest of the year in the hospital wing! I don't want the little creep anywhere near me!"

"Didn't seem that way when you were showing him Marlie's Firebolt." Ginny muttered under her breath. However, she knew better than to say such things out loud in Deanna's hearing. Her reaction to the thought that Malfoy might have feelings for her had been aggressive enough. Ginny did not want to think about how she might respond to the insinuation that it might be mutual.

"I wouldn't worry about it, DT. I think he was just too entranced by the sight of these rather nice Firebolts to be sarcastic to you." Rianne picked up the one with Crabbe's name on it and began stroking it gently. "They are nice, aren't they?"

"Beautiful." Deanna agreed, searching through the crate for her own. "Ginny, come over here, get a look at these." And as Ginny went over to inspect them for herself, the conversation switched to other things. However, Deanna could not stop wondering why Draco Malfoy was suddenly calling his cousin Marls. While Ginny, her suspicions now very much aroused, was even more intrigued by Malfoy, and how underneath the usual cruel, mocking exterior, lurked the ghost of an entirely different boy, sweet, innocent, vulnerable, nice even. (Well, OK, maybe that was going a bit too far.) Very strange indeed. Yes, Draco Malfoy definitely merited further investigation...

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It was not more than half an hour or so before Draco returned, this time with Crabbe and Goyle in tow. At least, they looked like Crabbe and Goyle, to Ginny and Deanna's unconcerned eyes.

"Hello, the heavies are back." Deanna muttered before returning to her broom. Ginny, her earlier bravery when faced with Malfoy evaporating when confronted by his two rather intimidating bodyguards, swiftly looked away, becoming very interested in the handle of Marlie's broom.

"Still playing with your toys?" Draco sneered as he sauntered into the room. "Really, Tyler, surely you're a bit too old for that by now?"

"These ain't toys, Malfoy." Deanna replied, not even bothering to look at him. "These are the real thing. Aren't they, Ri?"

"Yes, Deanna." said Rianne, her attention elsewhere. Crabbe and Goyle, to be exact. She'd noticed something odd about them when they'd come in. Normally so imposing and aggressive, they'd walked in hesitantly, as if they weren't certain about being there. And their first reaction on entering had been to blink, rub their eyes and stare around the common room as if they couldn't believe their eyes. Well, you couldn't really blame them. The Slytherin common room had never been that similar to the rest of the houses, and the arrival of Marlene Lovegood had changed it beyond recognition.

A long, windowless, stone room, with an ornate granite fireplace built in, decorated with carvings of snakes across the top, dragons at the side and two stone gargoyle statues on either side and a gilt-edged mirror above it, the common room wasn't too different in that respect. Nor were the bookshelves against the wall, containing a few common magical reference works, and various political treatises on how to gain power and crush one's enemies mercilessly while at the same time remaining popular and well liked (authors ranged from Sun Tzu and Machiavelli to Dale Carnegie and Dogbert) completely out of place - after all, the other common rooms did have bookshelves too, although, Ravenclaw aside, they tended to be less well-thumbed than the ones here. And the antique oak and mahogany tables and chairs weren't very different to the ones elsewhere in the school. What was really different was the decorations.

The perennial problem of there never being enough seats had been solved as only Marlie could have solved it. Beanbags of various shades, mostly black, (although there was that one Care Bears one that Marlie had been desperate to get out of her house at any cost), inflatable chairs with Anti-Sharp Things Charms on them to deter the Slytherin cats from using them as claw sharpeners plus a few large cushions provided more than enough seating for those unpretentious enough to put up with it, while the lower eye-level had been compensated for by a selection of small tables with shatterproof glass tops and bizarrely shaped central legs, one in the shape of a mermaid lounging on a rock, another in the shape of an apple tree, another in the shape of a dolphin, and so on. There were also various rugs around the place, varying from handwoven ethnic ones (handwoven by whom, and the exact ethnicity thereof unknown, but they were surely the product of an ethnic group of some kind), to fake animal skin, to a rather expensive looking Persian one in the centre of the room. While the walls, previously covered with tapestries which none of the Slytherins had really liked, were now decked out with various posters, including lots of Salvador Dali, Escher, and one called the Great Bear which resembled a map of the London Underground.

And then there was the lighting. The Slytherin common room was still pretty dark. But the darkness was broken here and there by dancing shapes and bright colours that seemed completely at odds with the rest of the room. At every table, either a lava lamp, a plasma globe or a fibre optic lamp of one colour or another. Attached to the ceiling, a couple of large mirror balls and some spotlights, which could change colour,

flash on and off or change angle according to the inhabitants' whim, and which definitely brightened the place up a bit. While it was still gloomy, you couldn't call it dull. In fact, it was probably the only room in Hogwarts to successfully combine gothic darkness with the brightest visual effects anywhere.

Fred the Cactus still had pride of place near the fire, with some fibre optic lights draped round him and a gleaming silver star positioned on top. The reasoning had been that seeing as they already had a plant that was bigger than some of the first years, there wasn't really any point getting hold of a tree. So they'd decorated Fred instead.

Finally, there was the one innovation that everyone, without exception, had fallen behind one hundred per cent. Most of the dungeons, and prior to Marlie Lovegood's second year, the Serpent's Nest had been no exception, had a very distinctive smell, a smell of damp and mildew, a smell of mould, of hidden things, of things denied the light for a very long time indeed, of decay. And the Slytherins had picked it up too, taking it with them on their hair, their clothes, their belongings, out of the common room and into the rest of the school, so that the dank, musty smell of the dungeons lurked wherever Slytherins went, becoming irretrievably and unconsciously associated with them, no doubt contributing to the hate the rest of the houses felt for them. No longer.

Four air purifiers had been strategically placed around the room, sucking the mould and dust out of the air and replacing it with a steady current of fresh, ionised air that made the atmosphere feel like that of a summer evening just after a thunderstorm. Three large dehumidifiers hummed quietly away in the background, drying out the air and getting rid of the damp that had ruined so many designer robes. True, it did mean there was a constant humming noise in the background, but most of them soon got used to that, and the fact that the common room no longer felt like a dungeon but was actually now quite a pleasant place to be was a benefit no one was willing to give up. Besides, for most of the time, the music coming from the massive state of the art stereo system in the corner effectively drowned it out.

All in all, it was a room any student would be proud to call their own. And the Slytherins liked it. Well, some of them did. Some of them thought it was a bit tasteless, while others disapproved of all the Muggle influences. But no one could be bothered to change it, and all were now used to it, so the student bedroom look was there to stay. Certainly no one was in the least bit surprised by it any more.

Which is why Rianne had been rather intrigued to see Crabbe and Goyle walk in, take one look, and stare about them in shock. Crabbe in particular looked furious, while Goyle could only gaze mutely at it all. Rianne had been particularly pleased to see Crabbe notice the stereo, grab Goyle's sleeve, point and mouth "Look at that!" to his friend, quite clearly jealous. She'd also been rather gratified to notice the two of them sniffing the air, hit by the contrast between the musty air in the corridor and the fresh, clean air of the common room. However, the thought had then occurred to her: why? They were after all Slytherin second years. They must be used to it by now. Her suspicions roused, Rianne began to watch them very closely, scrutinising them as only she could.

Rianne was of course, as you the observant reader will have guessed, right. (Isn't she always?) 'Crabbe' and 'Goyle' were of course our friends Harry and Ron, bePolyjuiced and now honorary members of Slytherin. Not that they were by any means used to the idea yet.

"Look at that!" hissed Ron. "They've got a bloody stereo!"

"Never mind the stereo, look at the lights!" Harry had seen fibre optics and plasma globes before, of course he had. But never so many in the same room. It was certainly a contrast to the far more staid and traditional Gryffindor common room. And a contrast to the rest of the dungeons too - Harry, used to the cold and damp of Snape's classroom and the outer corridor, had had to struggle not to gasp as the fresh, filtered air of the Slytherin common room, warmed by the fire and considered to be just right, had smacked him in the face almost like a physical blow. How was it, that the rest of the dungeons smelt so stale and old, yet the home of the Slytherins seemed so clear and fresh? He didn't know. He considered asking Ron, but suspected he'd only get one answer.

"Lucky Slytherin bastards!" Ron was muttering to himself. "The jammy gits! The jammy, jammy gits! How come they get the best common room?"

"Ron, shut it." Harry whispered. "We are Slytherins, remember?"

Fortunately, Draco appeared not to have heard them. Flinging himself into one of the beanbags, carelessly resting his feet up on the nearest table and indicating for Ron/Crabbe and Harry/Goyle to join him, Draco indicated the three girls still cooing over their new brooms.

"Look at them. Just because Tyler's mum saved some idiot Ravenclaw years ago, they manage to get some top flight brooms that aren't even out yet. And Lovegood had the nerve to accuse me of buying my way onto the team."

Harry and Ron turned to see where he was pointing. And for the first time, noticed Deanna, Rianne and Ginny going over some very fine brooms indeed. At least, Deanna and Ginny were. Rianne was watching the two of them very closely indeed. Harry felt his heart leap into his mouth as a horrifying thought occurred to him. Rianne knew about the Polyjuice Potion. And the way she was looking at them was the kind of gaze calculated to strip away every layer of resistance and unearth the truth no matter how long it took. And Rianne Stormosi was notorious for her patience and self-control. She knows, Harry thought. Or at least, it won't take her long to guess. He tried to grab Ron's attention. Without success. Ron was too busy drooling over the brooms to notice.

"The bastards!" he whispered. "The jammy bastards! Why do they always get the lucky breaks, eh? Them and their bloody rich parents with their bloody connections and their bloody favour system! Those brooms probably cost more than my entire house!"

"I doubt they're that expensive, Crabbe." Draco observed. His eyes narrowed, causing Ron to remember too late that he was meant to be a Slytherin. "Anyway, you weren't

objecting to wealth, connections and the barter system when my father got your father out of trouble with the Ministry that time, were you?"

"Er, no of course not, Malfoy." lied Ron. He turned to Harry for help, his eyes pleading with him to provide the perfect line that would save both their skins. Inspiration dawned and Harry duly obliged.

"I think Crabbe's just a bit jealous that Tyler and Stormosi are getting cool new brooms and he's not."

"Fair enough." Draco shrugged. Then something seemed to occur to him. "Wait a second. You two are both on the reserve team! Two of those brooms are yours!"

"They are?" Ron leapt to his feet.

"Of course they are, you don't think Tyler's ordered seven brooms for herself, do you?" Rolling his eyes, Draco turned to Harry. "Honestly, I know Crabbe's never been the school genius, but he's not normally this slow. Are you going to get yours too?" Ron was already heading over to where the three girls were sitting, intent on claiming a Firebolt. Harry, realising that this was no attempt on Ron's part to appear in character but a genuine bid to steal a Firebolt for himself, shot to his feet and ran after him.

"Ron, what the hell are you doing?" Harry hissed in his ear.

"What do you think?" came the reply. "Claiming my Firebolt!"

"Ron! You can't do that, it's dishonest!"

"Yeah? And?"

"Ron, it's not yours, leave it." Harry urged him. "How would you feel if you had one and someone nicked it?"

"I don't have one though, do I?" Ron's voice was threaded with resentment, but there was also a definite undertone of longing there as he gazed at those beautiful Firebolts. "I can't afford one, I'll probably never be able to afford one, and this could be my only chance of ever having one." The resentment returned. "Anyway, bet Crabbe and Goyle wouldn't think twice about stealing ours."

"That," Harry told him severely, "is no reason to sink to their level. Besides, if you nick their brooms, don't you think they'll realise they've been tricked? And they'll definitely want revenge." He lowered his voice. "Rianne and Deanna know about the potion. They'll guess it's us, if Rianne hasn't already. Right now they probably think it's a good enough prank for it to be worth keeping quiet about. Steal those Firebolts and they might change their minds."

Ron was still staring longingly at the brooms. But something in his face changed and he turned away, a bitter half-smile on his face.

"OK. I suppose you're right." He shot a glance at Draco, who was watching them both curiously. "But we'll have to go over there now, you know. Or Malfoy'll get suspicious."

"Alright then. But the brooms stay where they are, OK?"

Ron agreed, albeit reluctantly, and followed Harry over.

"Well?" was the terse response they got from Deanna as they approached. "Can we help you with something?"

"We heard you'd ordered Firebolts for the entire team." said Ron, bitterness giving him that extra bit of authenticity. Rianne scrutinised him carefully. Maybe Crabbe was OK after all.

"We were hoping we could have a look at them." Harry added helpfully.

"Well..." Deanna looked dubious but gave in anyway. "Alright then. Seeing as they're yours and all." She passed the brooms out to them. Both boys couldn't help staring at them as they held the Firebolts in their arms. Harry had seen some pretty fancy brooms in his time, but none like these. Ethereal and ghostly, they barely seemed to be there at all. He couldn't help imagining what it would be like to actually fly one. For a brief, crazy moment, he seriously considered going along with Ron's idea and running off with them. But his conscience wouldn't let him. Not to mention the thought of what Hermione would say if she discovered they'd wasted this perfect spying opportunity on stealing Crabbe and Goyle's broomsticks.

Harry glanced at Ron to see if he was wavering yet. Didn't seem to be, although he was gazing at the broom in awe. Then he lifted his eyes. And looked straight at Ginny.

Ginny looked straight back at her brother, clearly afraid but determined not to let him get to her. For a long while, the two of them just held each others' gaze. The other three did not intervene, although Harry noticed Deanna reaching for her wand. Rianne however laid a restraining hand on her arm, as if to stop Deanna bursting in. Harry looked at her closely. No mistaking the look there. If Rianne had been suspicious before, she now looked certain. However, there was also a definite look of tenderness there, as if Rianne had decided that it was best if they all stayed out of it and left the segregated siblings to it.

"So, Weasley." Ron said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Enjoying life in Slytherin?"

"It's alright." Three months in the Snake House was already having an effect. Ginny was giving nothing away.

"Like the brooms?" Ron indicated the Firebolt in Ginny's hands.

"They're lovely. Deanna says I can have a go on hers later if I want."

"Nice. So, what do you think of the common room then?"

"It's different. I do like the stereo though. Not sure about the fake fur rugs though." Ginny lifted a corner of the tigerskin effort she was sitting on, in a gesture that said more than words ever could. "Still, it's pretty cool overall. Bet no one else has got a common room like this."

I bet they haven't, Harry thought to himself, looking around. It had certainly never occurred to anyone in Gryffindor, not even Fred and George, to deck Gryffindor Tower out like that.

Ron nodded, trying to think of something else to say. Ginny was still staring back at him in that hostile way that was clearly asking if this conversation actually had a point or if they could both finish up and get back to things they were actually comfortable with.

"So, you're settling in alright then."

"Oh yes." Ginny's eyes bored coldly into him, daring him to get to the point. "I'm rather enjoying it, to tell you the truth. Everyone's been really nice to me."

"What, even Malfoy?" The words were out before he could stop them.

"He's been leaving me alone, let's put it that way." Ginny was now looking curious. Surely Crabbe would know all about how Malfoy treated her?

"What about Snape? How's he been?" Ron asked, changing the subject.

At this, Ginny finally betrayed some emotion, a genuine smile lighting up her face.

"He's been really nice to me. Really polite. I don't know what my brothers were complaining about, he's not said anything nasty to me at all."

"What, not once?" Ron could hardly believe his ears. Snape, being polite? To a Weasley? Such a thing had never happened before that Ron knew of.

Ginny shook her head. "No, not once. It's really weird. I've been to see him a few times after class to get help with work and he's always been really helpful. Really approachable. He's a brilliant House Head. I like him."

If Ron had been amazed before, that was nothing. Mouth wide open, eyes bulging, Ron looked like a cartoonish caricature of shock.

"You... like... Snape?" he spluttered. "What, actually like him?"

"Yeah. Don't you?" She was now looking at him extremely keenly. "He's certainly always been pretty good to your little gang after all, at least that's what I've heard."

Ron came to his senses, remembering he was after all meant to be Crabbe the Slytherin.

"Um, yeah. But I didn't know you did, what with being a Weasley and all." Would that cover him? He sincerely hoped so, although he didn't like the way the three genuine Slytherins were looking at him.

"I'm not your typical Weasley though, am I?" Ginny purred.

"No. You're not." Ron had to agree. This was Ginny as he'd never seen her before, a Slytherin and proud of it. Not a typical Weasley at all. He decided he'd had enough and passed the Firebolt back to Deanna. "Here, take the broom back. Keep them all together until the rest of the team get back, eh?" Forcing a smile, he gave the broom away, watching with gritted teeth as the Firebolt, the beautiful Firebolt, slipped out of his hands and out of his sight, his only chance to own one gone, his only chance to hold one over.

Deanna put the broom back in the crate. "OK then. You sure you don't want it now?"

"I'm sure." Ron said brusquely. Please, for the love of Gaia, just shut up and put it away! he thought. Before I change my mind...

Deanna turned to Harry. "You going to hand yours over too, Goyle?"

Harry nodded vaguely. Deanna, taking that as a yes, reached out for it and tried to take it off him. Tried being the operative word. Harry tightened his grip and tugged away, a plaintive look in his eyes. Deanna sighed and pulled even harder.

"Come on, Goyle. Don't be difficult. You'll get it back again."

Whimpering, Harry just clutched it all the more urgently. At least until he caught the glare Ron was giving him. Reluctantly, he let the broom go.

"That's better." Deanna replaced Goyle's Firebolt. "Honestly, anyone would think you weren't going to see them again."

Ron and Harry could only smile weakly, trying to ignore the knowing grin on Rianne's face. Saying a few quick goodbyes, they beat a hasty retreat and returned to where Draco was sitting waiting for them.

"Not got the brooms then?" Draco asked, curious. It wasn't like Crabbe and Goyle to willingly leave something that valuable of theirs in the hands of Deanna Tyler.

Ron stared wildly at Harry. How to allay Draco's suspicions? Fortunately, Harry's inventiveness did not desert him.

"No, we thought we'd keep them all together until everyone else gets back. We don't really want to use them until we're together as a team. Might be unlucky."

"Unlucky!" scoffed Draco. "Honestly, you two are so superstitious. Talent, lads. That's what'll win you matches. Not those lucky underpants of yours, Crabbe. Or that pink rabbit keyring that you think no one else knows about, Goyle."

Harry found himself blushing despite not being the intended recipient of the insult. Ron, however, couldn't stop grinning, the knowledge that Goyle owned a keyring shaped like a pink bunny rabbit being too good not to want to use as blackmail. Harry, noticing the look on his friend's face, swiftly decided that a change of subject was called for, before Ron started laughing at any more of Malfoy's jokes.

"Cut it out, you two." Harry snarled at them both. "Or I'll get the Heir of Slytherin after you."

Ron stopped laughing immediately. Draco, on the other hand, couldn't contain himself.

"The Heir of Slytherin?" he laughed. "Attack *me*? Oh Goyle, you are so naive sometimes. My family are descended from Salazar Slytherin himself, don't you know! His daughter by his second wife married one of my ancestors. No, I doubt the Heir will be after my blood." The laughter faded, as Draco punched the beanbag in frustration. "I wish, I wish, I really wish I knew who it was! I could help them."

"So it's not you then." Ron tried to control the surprise in his voice.

"Of course not, Crabbe. Don't you think I'd have said if it were me? No, I have no idea who it is. All I've got to go on are old legends regarding the Second Heir - after all, Father won't tell me anything about the first. A Mudblood died that time, you know. Before his time of course, fifty years ago now, but he knows about it. Won't tell me though. Reckons I should just stay out of it and keep him informed of events, let the Heir get on with it. So all I've got is the old legends describing the next Heir. Apparently she'll be a Slytherin witch with Muggle ancestry, around our age although her actual age might vary by a few years. Doesn't really narrow it down a lot, there's a fair few witches with Muggle ancestors, even here. The Vetinaris, for example."

"And Marlie Lovegood." Ron added, getting into the spirit of things. He caught the looks on Harry and Draco's faces. "OK, maybe not her." His face darkened as the thought of Marlie led smoothly into the thought of someone close to her, who also fitted the description. "Luella Martin?"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "She's not the Heir of Slytherin!" he yelled at Ron, furious that he'd even think of the idea.

Fortunately, Draco didn't seem to notice. In fact, he seemed to take Harry's side. "Don't be silly, Crabbe. That Mudblood? Heir of Slytherin? I don't think so!" However, his eyes narrowed as arrogance shifted into sadism. "However, others might be persuaded. Whether she's the Heir or not, one less Mudblood in the school can only be a good thing." He noticed the look of horror on Harry's face. "What's up, Goyle? Thought you hated her?"

Harry recovered himself, remembering he was supposed to be Goyle. "Oh, yeah, of course." he coughed. "But no one'll believe she's the Heir of Slytherin, surely? Not enough to get her expelled."

"Not without evidence, no. Which we just don't have!" Draco pounded the beanbag again.

"But if you found some?" Ron asked, intrigued. To hear Draco echoing his own suspicions certainly wasn't something he'd expected to discover. He realised what he was thinking. Stop it at once! he told himself. He's a Slytherin and a Malfoy, you can't possibly think of working with him! And yet the thought lingered on...

"Oh if we had some, you can have no doubt Pansy and I would be straight to McGonagall about it, not to mention my father."

"What, not Snape?" asked Harry.

Draco snorted. "As if! There's no way he'd ever take seriously anything we said about his beloved little Luella. The way he favours her and Tyler, it's disgusting." If Draco was aware of the irony in that sentence, he didn't show it. "No, it'll have to be McGonagall, she's a lot more fair minded and far easier to manipulate. Pansy hates that little clique as much as we do, you know. Like you two, she wants revenge. And wouldn't getting Deanna Tyler's little Mudblood friend expelled be the perfect method. Poetic justice, I'd say."

"I'll bet." Ron whispered. Unlike Harry, who was staring incomprehensibly at Draco, Ron knew exactly what he was referring to. Marlie Lovegood's brush with death and Deanna Tyler's avenging of it had been a hot topic around the Weasley dinner table for months.

He was jerked out of his reverie by a nudge from Harry. Ron glanced up and noticed with a shock that Harry's robes were getting increasingly loose. Not to mention the fact that Goyle's close cropped hair was slowly beginning to grow out into the uncontrolled mop that Harry normally sported. The potion must be wearing off, Ron realised. Time to go. He got up.

"I need to go to the hospital wing." he announced. "All that Christmas dinner's doing my stomach no good."

"I'll come with you - I'm not feeling well either." said Harry, hoping against hope that Draco hadn't noticed the streaks of ginger beginning to appear in Crabbe/Ron's hair.

"Ah, the perils of gluttony." Draco observed, a wry grin on his face. "When will you two ever learn? Go on, get out of here. Don't want you two stinking the dorm out tonight, after all."

Glad of the reprieve, Harry and Ron said a few quick goodbyes and beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the first floor toilets.

Rianne watched them go. They hadn't been seated close enough for her to overhear the conversation, but that didn't mean she'd not been observing them. And their sudden exit had only served to confirm her suspicions.

"Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle are leaving in rather a hurry, aren't they?" she observed to Ginny.

Ginny had also been glancing in Crabbe and Goyle's direction throughout, intrigued by Crabbe's sudden interest in her wellbeing and relative ignorance of things he should really have known. "They are, aren't they? What's up with them, Ri? They're definitely not themselves. Far too nice."

"No." Rianne grinned. "They're certainly not themselves. Are they, Deanna?"

Deanna looked up from her Firebolt. "They looked like Crabbe and Goyle to me. Not many ways of making yourself look exactly like another person. You'd have to use Polyjuice Potion or something to look that convincing." The Knut dropped as Deanna realised where she'd heard Polyjuice Potion mentioned not too long ago. "Ri, you're kidding."

"I'm not. I thought there was something odd about them as soon as they walked in, and Crabbe's interest in Ginny here just confirmed it." Rianne grinned in triumph.

"Confirmed what?" asked Ginny, looking from Deanna to Rianne inquisitively.

"That 'Crabbe' and 'Goyle' were none other than our dear friends Harry and Ron." Rianne smiled, watching the expression on Ginny's face turn from curiosity to shock with a twisted kind of delight.

"Harry and Ron!" gasped Ginny. "But how? And why?"

"As to why, I have no idea. Some kind of prank on Malfoy, I imagine. But Deanna and I know exactly how."

"Polyjuice Potion." Deanna explained. "We caught Ron and Hermione brewing it earlier this term. We didn't ask them what they planned to do with it. Now we know."

"We do indeed." Rianne agreed. "Come on. Let's go and catch up with them. Find out the story behind this little stunt." Pausing only to make sure the Firebolts were properly secure, the three girls went in search of Harry and Ron.

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It didn't take long to find what they were looking for. As they emerged into the Entrance Hall, the sound of banging mingled with two male voices shouting and cursing met their ears.

It seemed to be coming from a cupboard under the stairs. Someone was thumping the door from inside, demanding to be let out immediately. While outside the door were two neatly arranged pairs of shoes which all three girls recognised as belonging to Crabbe and Goyle.

"Looks like our suspicions were correct." commented Rianne.

"Blimey, they did do their homework, didn't they?" remarked Deanna, impressed that two individuals as lacking in guile as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley could come up

with a plan that complex and actually have it succeed. Must have been Hermione's idea, she decided.

"They don't sound happy, do they?" Ginny was beginning to feel a little worried. Crabbe and Goyle's intense dislike of Deanna Tyler and anyone who called her a friend was well known, as was Deanna's delight in taunting Draco Malfoy and anyone who called him a friend. The fact that Crabbe and Goyle were not in the best of moods, while Deanna was looking particularly gleeful at their predicament did not bode well. Ginny could only hope that the advantage of numbers would persuade Crabbe and Goyle not to rise to the bait which Deanna was almost certain to provide them with.

"Better let them out, I suppose." Rianne was saying, raising her wand. "Fun as it is to hear them suffering. *Alohomora!*"

The door sprang open, revealing Crabbe and Goyle sitting there, their fists clenched in mid-pound, staring up at them, the expressions on their faces changing swiftly from fury to embarrassment.

For a moment, no one spoke. It was Deanna who broke the silence.

"Crabbe, what exactly are you doing in a cupboard?" The voice sounded innocent enough, but you did not need Slytherin sensitivity to pick up the laughter threatening to escape.

"What's it to you?" snarled Crabbe, less than happy at having being made to look like an idiot in front of his worst enemy.

"Nothing, Crabbe, nothing." grinned Deanna. "We were just curious as to what you two were doing in that cupboard, that's all."

"Nothing that concerns you." grunted Goyle.

"Oh, I see." Rianne said, in a way which indicated that she saw only too well. She turned to Deanna. "A bit of male bonding in the closet, evidently. We'd better leave them to it, then. Don't want to force them to come out prematurely, after all."

"Certainly not." Deanna replied. "You know what men are like about their secret little rituals, after all. Especially these boarding school types."

"Why, what about these boarding school types?" asked Ginny, enthralled. Her brothers had never mentioned anything unusual about boys who attended boarding schools.

"Put it this way." Deanna told her delicately. "In the Muggle world at least, men of a certain background, educated at prestigious boarding schools and of affluent parentage, have a marked tendency for, how can I put this?" She turned to Rianne for assistance.

"Shall we say that the rigidly all-male environment in which they find themselves inclines a great many of them to certain sexual practices which, erm, deviate from the sexual norm, so to speak." Rianne was smiling at both boys in a way which let them know exactly what she was referring to.

"Hey now, wait a second!" yelled a horrified Crabbe. "We were NOT doing *that*!"

"Course not, Crabbe." snickered Deanna. "We believe you. Really."

"We weren't!" both boys insisted.

"I'm sure you weren't." soothed Rianne. "I'm sure there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. However, the rest of the world is, alas, all too willing to jump to the worst possible conclusions. I'm sure we understand each other."

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged looks and came to a decision, namely that the face lost by admitting they'd been drugged and locked up in there was far less than what would be lost by Deanna and Rianne spreading rumours around the school that Dusty Springfield and Barbra Streisand featured highly in their record collections.

"Alright, alright." Crabbe muttered. "Someone left these cakes lying around, and they must have had sleeping potion in them or something, because the next thing we knew, we were trapped in here. It isn't funny!" Deanna and Rianne had managed to reign themselves in and prevent themselves from bursting out laughing, Rianne with more success than Deanna, but both were grinning. Ginny, on the other hand, was beginning to snigger quietly in the background. Deanna and Rianne looked at each other, then at Ginny, before finally giving in and laughing long and hard.

"Stop laughing!" snapped Goyle. "It's not funny!" This, however, just caused the three girls to laugh all the harder. Eventually, Deanna pulled herself together and dried her eyes.

"You're right. It's not funny at all. Is it, girls?"

"No, Deanna. Course not." coughed Ginny.

"Nothing amusing about the situation whatsoever, Tyler." Rianne smirked. "Come on, let's get back to the common room. I think these two have suffered enough. Bye, lads." She shepherded a still snickering Deanna and Ginny back towards the common room, leaving Crabbe and Goyle alone in the Entrance Hall.

"I hate that lot." whispered Crabbe, trembling with the force of his emotions. "I really, really hate that lot! Tyler, Martin, Lovegood, Stormosi, that little Weasley brat, all of them! I'd dearly love to murder all of them, and if it hadn't got my brother kicked out, I'd do it too."

Goyle patted his friend's shoulder in solidarity. "Don't worry, mate. We'll get our own back on Tyler, just you wait. Come on, let's go talk to Malfoy. He'll come up with a plan. You'll see."

Crabbe's anger abated a little. "Yes, he probably will. Damn it, Goyle, why couldn't he have had an older brother, eh?"

Goyle shrugged. "Don't know. You'd have to ask Mr. Malfoy about that. Come on, let's go find him." The two of them made a swift exit.

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By this time, Harry, Ron and Hermione were gathered in the hospital wing, Hermione having been taken there after mistakenly imbibing a cat hair instead of a Slytherin hair in her Polyjuice Potion. Madam Pomfrey had finished dosing Hermione with a Fur Removing Potion and something that undid faulty Transfigurations. They'd told her that Hermione had been researching ways of becoming an Animaga, and tried Polyjuice Potion as a shortcut. Hermione herself had insisted that neither boy had known anything about what she'd been up to. Madam Pomfrey had looked sceptical but to their relief hadn't asked any probing questions or lectured them, probably feeling that Hermione had been punished enough. Hermione had been left covered in cat fur, complete with cats' ears, eyes and a tail, but was otherwise unharmed. The three of them were now gathered round Hermione's bed with the screens pulled round, Madam Pomfrey having reluctantly let them have a few minutes to talk alone.

"Well, we still don't know who's doing it, but at least it wasn't a complete waste of time." sighed Ron. "We know about that Second Heir legend now. How strange, I never thought the Heir of Slytherin would be a girl."

"Didn't think girls were up to it, did you?" snapped Hermione, the experience of looking like some kind of cat mutant doing nothing for her patience.

"No." muttered Ron. "Just that, well, Salazar Slytherin wasn't exactly a feminist, was he? His first wife left him because he was an evil git, his second wife was some blonde bimbo who he married purely because he fancied her, and apparently he had his sister walled up in a convent because she wouldn't marry the bloke he wanted her to. Doesn't sound to me like the kind of bloke to make his chosen Heir a girl."

"No, I suppose not." mused Hermione. "So where did this Second Heir legend come from then? It doesn't make sense."

"It'd help if we knew what the actual legend was." said Harry. "I mean, Malfoy wasn't very forthcoming with the details, was he? I suppose he assumed Crabbe and Goyle already knew it."

"So we need to find out the legend then." said Ron promptly. "But how? I'm not posing as Crabbe again."

"You might not need to." said Harry thoughtfully. His mind had gone racing back to when they'd first put the cakes out and seen Ginny and Deanna advancing on them. "Well, not Crabbe anyway. Come on, think! A Slytherin who's liked by her housemates, generally not considered to know anything about the house legends and wouldn't be suspected if she asked about it."

Ron shook his head. "You've lost me."

"Ginny, you idiot!" laughed Harry. "You could change into her, find Deanna or someone and ask them. I'm sure they'd tell you."

Ron stared in disbelief before digging in his heels. "No way."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Come on, if you can manage Crabbe, you can manage your own sister, surely."

"I said no! I'm not doing it! I told you, I'm not having anything to do with her."

"Relax, Ron." Hermione sounded weary beyond belief. "You won't have to. There's no potion left, and I can't brew any more like this. You won't have to impersonate Ginny. Of course, if you hadn't been such a prat in the first place and disowned her, you'd be able to ask her direct, but there we are."

Ron opened his mouth indignantly as if to fight back, but Harry stopped him. "That's it! That's what we can do. Just ask a Slytherin straight out. If all we need to know is an old legend, the Slytherins might tell us that themselves. All we'd need to do is ask a Slytherin who's well disposed towards us."

"I'm not asking Ginny!" snapped Ron. "And I'm not getting Fred to ask Lovegood either." he added.

"You're not doing it." said Hermione decisively. "We need someone with a bit of tact who doesn't think they're all scum. Good idea, Harry! Of course, normally I'd be first to volunteer, but we need to ask now and I'm stuck up here. You'll have to do it. Which one are you going to go for?"

"Lu." said Harry, not even stopping to think. "I don't know the others that well. And I'm sure she'll tell me. I'll ask as soon as she gets back." Mentioning Luella reminded Harry of another topic that Draco had brought up. "I need to talk to her anyway, I think she's in danger. Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy seem to want revenge against Deanna for some reason. I think they're thinking of pinning the attacks on Lu because she fits the Second Heir profile and getting her expelled as a way of getting back at Deanna."

"She got Crabbe and Goyle's older brothers expelled in her first year." Ron filled in. "Pansy's older sister too. Doesn't surprise me they want their own back."

"But that's absurd!" protested Hermione. "There's no evidence Lu had anything to do with the attacks!"

"Exactly." said Harry grimly. "That's what Malfoy said. They can't do a thing at the moment because they have no proof. But I want to warn Luella anyway. I want to make sure she's on her guard and not likely to do anything that might put her in danger."

"Very chivalric." commented Ron. Harry blushed.

"Shut it, you. She's a friend, I just want to make sure she stays out of trouble, that's all."

"Course you do, Harry." smirked Ron, dodging out of the way of the slap Harry aimed at him.

Unfortunately, the commotion brought Madam Pomfrey running.

"I think you two have had quite long enough, don't you?" she fumed at them. "Go on, out. Miss Granger needs rest and quiet." And with that she threw both boys out.

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A short while later, Harry and Ron were back in their dorm. Harry couldn't help noticing that Ron seemed downcast for some reason, as if something was bothering him, something he hadn't wanted to talk about in front of Hermione. And it didn't take a genius to guess what it was.

"You OK, Ron?"

"Yeah, course. Why shouldn't I be?"

"No reason. You just look miserable, that's all."

"Well, I'm not. I'm fine."

"Fine. Right. Of course. Should have guessed." Ron was obviously not going to talk of his own accord, so Harry decided on a more direct approach. "It's Ginny, isn't it?"

He was right. The flinch at the mention of her name confirmed his suspicions.

"What about her?" snarled Ron.

"I noticed it when you were talking to her today in the Slytherin common room. You looked a bit depressed then. You look even more so now. Doesn't take much to figure it out."

Ron's defiance melted as he sagged listlessly onto the bed. "Is it that obvious?" Harry nodded. Ron laughed bitterly. "Should have guessed. We're open books, us Gryffindors. Everyone can tell what we're feeling. When we're happy everyone wants to know what the joke is. When we're sad, the whole world knows it. Yeah, everyone knows what Gryffindors are thinking." He lowered his eyes. "Trying to find out what's going on inside a Slytherin's head, on the other hand, is next to impossible. I've never seen Ginny like that before, Harry. I used to be able to read her with no problems. Every thought, every feeling was no sooner born than the world knew it. Now look at her. She's so..." he shivered, "calm. So controlled. So... Slytherin." He stared at Harry, despair in his eyes. "She's one of them, Harry. Only been there three months if that, and already it's as if she's been there all her life. She'd never have spoken to Crabbe that calmly before. And yet she held her own. She's enjoying it

there, Harry. She's fitting in. She's at home there!" He choked on the last sentence, in what could have been a manoeuvre to hide a sob.

"Isn't that a good thing?" asked Harry gently. "She's going to be spending the next seven years there, you don't want her to be completely miserable, do you?"

"Rather than her belonging!" yelled Ron, leaping to his feet. He began pacing the floor as sadness gave way to fury. "I don't want her to belong there, I don't want her to feel at home there! I want her to hate it. I want her to wish she was a Gryffindor like us." He stopped pacing as the anger faded away, leaving a desolation that was worse than the rage had been. "I'd rather have her miserable than a Slytherin. I'd rather she was upset and traumatised yet still my little sister than what she is now." He turned to look at Harry again. "She's like a stranger, Harry. I don't know her anymore. I don't know who she is anymore." He sank down on the bed next to Harry, his head in his hands. "I miss her, Harry, I really do. I know we often argued, I know I picked on her, while she told tales on me to Mum, but that didn't mean I didn't like the little squirt. She was still my little sister, and she was still a cute little kid when she wasn't being a pest. Not any more. She doesn't seem like a kid anymore."

"She had to grow up sooner or later, Ron." Harry reminded him.

"Yeah, I know. But not this quickly. Not like this!" Ron shut his eyes, unwilling or unable to say anymore. Harry waited for him to speak again. "Do you know what really hurts, Harry? Do you?"

"What?"

"Snape. She actually likes Snape. She likes him!" Ron shook his head, not able to understand how anyone could actually like Snape. "Can you believe it?"

"Well, she is in his house, Ron." Harry pointed out. "Maybe he's OK to her. Lu seems to think he's wonderful too."

"There's a shocker." muttered Ron. "What is it with all these Slytherin witches, Harry? Why do they all seem to think he's some kind of stud? I mean, look at him. He's not exactly Gilderoy Lockhart, is he? He's not even got charm on his side. Or money from the look of him."

"No idea, Ron. Maybe it's a girl thing."

Ron, now much less depressed than he had been, could only agree. "You said it, mate. Harry, I tell you this, as long as I live, I will never, ever, understand girls."

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Meanwhile, back in the Serpents' Nest, Crabbe and Goyle had made their way back and rejoined Draco in their dorm.

"Feeling better, lads?" Draco enquired.

"No." snarled Crabbe.

"Some asshole locked us in a cupboard all afternoon." Goyle informed him.

Draco snickered. "You tossers. How?"

"They left some cakes lying around." Crabbe muttered. "We ate them and next thing we knew we were locked up."

"And to make it worse, it was Tyler, Stormosi and Weasley who found us." complained Goyle.

"Very amused they were too." Crabbe was glaring at Draco as if to blame him. "Most embarrassing experience of our lives. What are you going to do about it?"

Draco lay back on his bed, amused. "Boys, if you two are stupid enough to eat any food that just happens to be left lying around, that's no reason for me to use up valuable genius on finding the perpetrators, is it now?" Suddenly it occurred to him that if Crabbe and Goyle had been locked up for most of the afternoon, who had he been talking to all that time? "Hold on. What sort of time are we talking about here?"

"Just after dinner."

"But you couldn't have been locked up." frowned Draco. "You were right here. We were talking about the Firebolts and the Heir of Slytherin, remember?"

Crabbe and Goyle shook their heads. "This is the first time we've spoken to you since dinner, Malfoy."

Draco shook his head. "No, you were right here. You spoke to me, then you went over to talk to Tyler and her mates and have a look at those new brooms of theirs. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"What new brooms?"

Draco fell silent, the brain nurtured by his father into being that of an evil overlord in waiting working overtime. So someone had drugged and imprisoned the real Crabbe and Goyle then impersonated them to talk to him. It explained a lot. He'd thought at the time that they'd not been entirely themselves, and their abrupt disappearance had also seemed a tad suspicious. Now he knew why.

"We've been had, boys."

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Chapter Fourteen The Ties That Bind

Just as every film relies as much on the efforts of the camera crew, props manufacturers, special effects supremos and costume people behind the scenes as on the stars out front, those fortunate ones who glory in the attention and soak up the limelight as if it were as necessary a substance as oxygen (and maybe it is), so the activities of those outside Hogwarts form as vital a part of this little tale as the exploits of the denizens of the Serpents' Nest. Although you could hardly call Caitlin Tyler a backstage worker, nor for that matter Melissa Lovegood. However, it's as well to be aware that there is life outside Hogwarts. One day, it might not be the venue for the action and you, my lovely readers, would be well prepared if you got used to the idea now. But that's a long way off. For now, let's just say that it's time to find out what the other half of the Slytherin Four have been doing.

But before we catch up with Marls and Luella, a little intermission, as it were. It's not the younger generation that concerns us at the moment, but that of their mothers, and one mother in particular.

Caitlin's Christmas had got off to a leisurely start. With her daughter at Hogwarts and her presence not required at the Lovegoods' until that evening, she was in no rush. A lie-in and an unhurried breakfast, followed by her seasonal devotions made up her Christmas morning. While few mages were overtly religious (what was the point of begging the gods for help when magic accomplished pretty much what was required?) it still paid to keep the gods sweet and even someone as irreligious as Caitlin kept the major festivals like May Day, Halloween and the solstices.

Midday, then, saw her dressed in plainish dark blue robes, leaving her house on foot looking less than happy. Christmas was a time for visiting family after all, even those members one found disagreeable, and Caitlin didn't really have a lot of relatives left.

Arabella Figg opened her door, unsurprised to see Caitlin on the doorstep. The old witch's nose wrinkled in what could have been disgust or contempt.

"Well, well. Caitlin Tyler. Not completely devoid of family feeling, I see."

Caitlin gritted her teeth. "No proof we even are family, Arabella."

"No proof? My grandniece the Slytherin Redeemer and you have the nerve to say I'm not a Tal-y-Rhys?" Arabella's contemptuous smile had shifted into a malignant snarl. Caitlin resisted the urge to fling a few hexes at her. Quite apart from the indignity of it all, Arabella Figg was one of her old Auror trainers, an ex-Slytherin and despite her years, not someone to trifle with. She was also Luella's great aunt on her mother's side, a Muggle-born witch regarded as at best eccentric and at worst someone to be avoided by the rest of her family.

"True. But you're not part of the line with the title, the land and the money. Are you?" Low, Caitlin. Very low. Arabella had always known just how to get under her skin and Caitlin couldn't resist the urge to brag.

All emotion vanished from the older witch's face. "I never thought that you of all people would be playing the pure-blood card. And your own father a Muggle too."

"I've got nothing against Muggles." Caitlin folded her arms to keep out the cold, although she had to admit, the cold did help one maintain one's composure. "Some of the greatest acts of kindness I've ever experienced came from Muggles, your niece and nephew-in-law for a start. And the worst things that have ever happened to me have been done by my own kind." She shivered, trying not to remember it.

Arabella's demeanour softened just a little at this, harshness being replaced by the merest hint of grief. "Yes, you saved just one life too many from the Dark Lord to stay unnoticed. Shame it wasn't my daughter's."

Caitlin raised her eyes to Arabella's. Staring into them, Arabella instantly realised she'd perhaps gone too far.

"Believe me, Arabella, if I could have saved Louise, I would. Not for anything would I have let Diana's twin die. But the bastards got to her first. The bastards got to her first, and no it doesn't make me feel any better knowing that I did at least manage to save her husband and daughter."

Arabella was looking at her, if not with sympathy, then certainly with respect. "Maybe you're not a feckless young aristocrat playing at being an Auror after all. You've changed, Caitlin Tyler. You've changed a lot."

Caitlin shrugged. "I grew up. We all did. War has a way of doing that to you."

Arabella was still scrutinising her extremely carefully. "You've done more than just grow up. You've completely metamorphosed. The girl I trained up was a spoilt, self-pitying brat who liked all the new powers but hated working for them, and found any actual violence 'icky'. Now look at you. Melissa tells me you work out daily, and you've used the Unforgivables more than all the rest of the Aurors put together."

Caitlin couldn't deny it. She wasn't exactly noted for being merciful. Statistically, she didn't bring that many cases before the courts, for the simple reason that most of the criminals she encountered either didn't make it as far as a trial or immediately confessed to everything. For some reason, most dark mages seemed to prefer Azkaban to interrogation by Caitlin Tyler, although there were always a few weirdoes who actually seemed to like the idea.

Arabella stepped back, holding the door open and indicating for Caitlin to enter. "Never let it be said I keep my guests hanging around on the doorstep. Come in."

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Caitlin followed Arabella into the front room, trying to ignore the vaguely musty smell and avoid the cats that had a nasty habit of weaving around one's legs, an easy trap for the unwary. Arabella had injured herself tripping over them on more than one occasion and Caitlin, Auror reflexes or no Auror reflexes, did not relish the thought of having to explain to the DDAE medics that after years of escaping extremely

dangerous dark mages unscathed, she'd managed to incapacitate herself tripping over a cat.

Fortunately, the cats were all far too busy bothering Arabella to give Caitlin any cause for concern.

"What's the matter, my darlings?" crooned Arabella. "Are you hungry then? Are you? No need to fret. Mummy's coming." She turned back to Caitlin. "Take a seat, make yourself comfortable. I'm just off to feed the cats." She bustled into the kitchen, still fussing over the cats, no doubt to serve up the finest cuts of meat she could afford. Caitlin could just see her producing smoked salmon and caviar for them, or maybe one of those Japanese blowfishes that was poisonous unless cooked in exactly the right way. How was it, Caitlin wondered, that Arabella had had two children and had spent their entire lives terrorising, dominating and manipulating them (or in the case of her Slytherin daughter Diana, trying to), and yet where her cats were concerned, nothing but the best was good enough for them? It was a puzzle, and one which never ceased to anger Caitlin.

She'd not known Arabella's older daughter, Louise Figg-Clearwater, that well. After all, when someone is in a different house (Ravenclaw in this case) and two years older, there aren't many opportunities to get to know them. Her Slytherin twin sister Diana, on the other hand, had been a good friend of Caitlin's, helped by the two of them being Quidditch team mates. It had been quite a shock to discover that Diana hated her mother and had as little to do with her as possible. After all, she'd always got on well with her own mother. She'd soon got used to it, however. She recalled many occasions when Diana had stormed into the Slytherin common room raging that her mother was once again being manipulative/arrogant/intolerant/controlling/domineering/absolutely impossible/delete as applicable. Diana's insistence on loving whoever she wanted to, doing whatever she wanted to, living however she wanted to and generally refusing to be at her mother's beck and call like her less strong-willed sister had caused more than a few fights. Then there was the little fact of Diana's insistence on becoming an Auror, which had really driven her mother crazy. Arabella was a firm believer in witches getting married young and staying home to raise children. This hadn't, of course, stopped her pursuing a career as a Auror trainer (Arabella Figg was one of those witches who firmly supported every rule that conservative society could come up with, providing of course that there was not the merest hint of a suggestion that they applied to her) but the idea of any other woman entering the DMLE (as it had been then) was anathema. Allowances had been made for Melissa - as the newly orphaned daughter of Mandragor Harker, in Arabella's opinion the finest Department Head anywhere, it was only natural that she would want to avenge her father, and only reasonable that her grief exempt her from pursuing what would normally have been expected of her. However, every other witch on the Auror training programme had been in for a rough ride, and her daughter had got it worst.

Even now, Caitlin couldn't help feeling just a little resentful at the way Arabella had treated Diana. She'd joined the Aurors in order to impress her mother and follow in her footsteps, and what had Arabella done? Harassed her at every opportunity. Caitlin had hated her then, and her feelings had only abated into pity because Arabella now seemed so thoroughly alone. There and then, she'd sworn that when she had children

of her own, she'd support them no matter what they wanted to do with their lives. One reason among many why she'd named her own daughter after Diana Figg, changing the spelling and pronunciation a little so as to prevent her getting completely overshadowed by the other Diana's memory. And one reason why she'd never dissuaded Deanna from her dream of being an Auror, no matter how much her maternal instincts had screamed out against it.

Stop it, she told herself. Deanna'll be fine as an Auror. No Voldemort around these days. Deanna wouldn't have to go through what she'd had to. Yeah, right. If she kept telling herself that long enough she might even start to believe it.

She tried to distract herself by looking at the photos on the mantelpiece. It didn't help. They all seemed to be of Louise and Patrick Clearwater and their baby daughter, who must be about fifteen by now. In the year above Deanna, Caitlin vaguely recalled. She traced her fingers across Louise's face. Easy to tell she was related to Luella. Same grey-blue eyes, same chestnut brown hair framing a face just a little too innocent for its own good. However, there was a pained look in Louise's eyes that Caitlin had never seen in Luella's, a look that said all too clearly that this woman was not leading the life she wanted to live, that despite the outward happiness, here was someone with a lot of dreams and ambitions going unrealised, an intellect going to waste. You could tell she wasn't a Slytherin. Maybe the Death Eaters had done her a favour after all.

Caitlin gazed straight into Louise's eyes. No doubt about it, just like Luella. Surely not...? And yet, it would explain a lot about the young Redeemer. Especially the way she hated the limelight and yet couldn't bear to be ordinary, couldn't bear to be just a young girl in a small town surrounded by people who didn't have half her insight. Could be past-life memories coming through. The thought warmed her heart. Maybe Louise's death hadn't been so senseless after all.

She screwed up her eyes in pain, remembering that night. Arriving at the Clearwaters' cottage to find the place trashed, Patrick Clearwater begging the grey-robed Death Eater holding his baby daughter not to kill her, he'd do anything if they just let his daughter go, and on the floor next to him, his wife Louise Figg-Clearwater lying dead, her face frozen in a silent scream of terror.

Caitlin didn't fully remember what had happened next. There were three of them, she remembered that much, one tall, thin and presumably male, another of average height and a strangely regal bearing, female, and the third another male, almost as tall as the first but far more muscular, all in the dehumanising grey robe and hood that was standard Death Eater uniform.

The shock of seeing someone she knew dead at the Death Eaters' hands had temporarily removed all reason, leaving her standing in the door, alone, unmoving and horribly vulnerable. By all rights, they should have killed her on the spot. She never did find out why they hadn't, at least not until much later when she'd realised who one of their number must have been.

The woman had been first to react, flinging Avada Kedavra at her. She'd only just come to and dived out of the way in time, although the other witch's aim had seemed

to go awry at the last minute, almost as if someone in the room had willed it to go off course. The curse had been harmlessly deflected into a hapless pot plant instead.

She'd retaliated, of course, although not with an Unforgivable - at that stage in her career she'd still been too principled to use them - and soon pitched battle had broken out. Not for long, though. The taller man had hit her with a Stunning Charm and she'd passed out. She'd come round to find a shocked Patrick Clearwater and several Aurors gathered round her, all of whom had been amazed to see her still alive. Apparently as soon as he'd knocked her out, the tall Death Eater had snarled at the other two to get going, there'd be Ministry reinforcements arriving at any second. The woman had protested, demanding to know why they at least couldn't finish the job and kill them all, but he'd overruled her on the grounds that killing an Auror in cold blood would only serve to spur the Ministry into actually doing something effective for once. All three of them had then departed without another word. It wasn't until much later that she'd realised that the tall wizard who'd prevented his colleagues killing her could only have been Severus. It hadn't made her feel any better.

Arabella's re-appearance jerked Caitlin out of her reverie. She turned round to see her holding a tray bearing a teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl and two china cups in that fiddly style that makes them near impossible to hold on to and capable of holding just enough liquid to quench the thirst of a small rodent. And topping it all off was a plate of those infernal pink biscuits that all Muggle women over a certain age seemed to think were wonderful.

Arabella set the tray down, seated herself in the best armchair and motioned for Caitlin to take a seat. One cup of tea later, and the usual small talk had commenced.

"So how is Luella anyway? What with one thing and another you've probably seen more of her than I have recently." It was difficult to tell with Arabella Figg, but she seemed genuinely regretful as opposed to bitter.

"Well enough. She seems fine at the moment, although I won't deny the last few months have not been easy on her. Mel told you about the Mark?"

"She did. Poor child, how is she taking it?"

"Surprisingly well. Once Severus had explained what it was and what it meant, she seemed to be much more relaxed about it all. All she needed was a little reassurance that it wasn't evil. Can you believe she thought it was a Dark Mark?"

Arabella did not share Caitlin's amusement. "The Dark Mark is not a topic to joke about, Caitlin. No one who has seen the Mark above their home or that of a loved one finds it amusing."

"And you think I'm not one of them, Arabella?" Caitlin said softly. "I saw my best friend murdered in front of me, and had to watch as the place I'd called home, that my family had called home for generations, was totally destroyed. And the Dark Mark was there, shining above the ruins. They'd put it in place after they'd killed James." Caitlin shuddered at the memory. "For all I knew they'd got Sirius too. Wish they had

now." She took a sip of tea in an attempt to wash away the aftertaste of actually saying his name. It didn't work.

Arabella tutted sympathetically. "It's always the ones you least expect who go over, isn't it? Never would have thought that Sirius Black, of all people, would join You-Know-Who. He always seemed such a nice boy."

"Didn't he just." Caitlin laughed the laugh of one whose sense of humour died a long time ago. "Managed to fool even me. You know, Arabella, that is the one thing that still puzzles me even to this day, how he managed to stop me finding out. I mean, with Severus, although I never guessed he was a Death Eater, once I knew, it made sense. All sorts of little things that, looking back, gave it away. All the little signs that couldn't really mean anything else. But with Sirius, nothing. That was why it threw me the way it did. That's why, even now, I still can't quite believe he was capable of all that. Because up until they arrested him, there was no clue, no indication whatsoever, that he was anything other than the brave, fun-loving Auror we all loved. At least with Severus, I can't say I was really surprised. Hurt, yes, shocked, yes, betrayed, oh gods yes. But not surprised. Not really."

"The only thing surprising about Severus Snape is that having joined them, he came back to our side." Arabella observed. "I'm still not entirely sure why, unless he thought we were onto him and wanted to save his own skin."

"No!" Caitlin almost shouted the word. "No, it was genuine, I know it was."

"You seem rather convinced of that, Caitlin." Arabella raised an eyebrow archly.

"He's not evil, Arabella. Despite what everyone thinks. He came back to our side because his conscience told him to." The words came out despite themselves. And while she'd always intellectually believed them, for possibly the first time, she found herself believing it from the heart. He's a good man, she found herself thinking. He's honourable. Trustworthy. He's not evil. And hot on the heels of that, the dawning realisation that she no longer hated him. In that instant, she knew, without needing to be told, that not only had he been the one to drag his fellow Death Eaters away at the Clearwater house without finishing her off, he'd been the one who'd performed the piece of wandless magic that had sent that Avada Kedavra curse off course. "I'm telling you, Arabella, he's not that kind of man."

Arabella snorted, unconvinced. "If you say so, Caitlin. But I don't believe it myself. They never told you how Louise died, did they? They used Cruciatus on her a couple of times, then put the Imperius Curse on Patrick and made him kill her. And it was your precious Severus that did it. He told me so himself. After the war ended. Confessed everything to me and asked if there was any way he could make amends. Ha! As if anything could bring either of my girls back."

Caitlin froze briefly. And yet this information didn't really have the effect Arabella had intended. Far from being shocked by it, it simply seemed to wash over her. After all, she of all people knew what Severus was capable of. And at least it hadn't been Diana he'd killed. The Death Eaters had got to her long before they'd recruited Severus, Diana having died in action as an Auror in Caitlin's final year. While Caitlin

had already intended to join up so she could fight alongside her, her death had cemented it into nothing sort of obsession.

"Severus did a lot of things back then that he'd later have cause to regret." Caitlin told her, a touch pointedly. "But unlike most of his colleagues, he is sorry for what he did. I tell you, he has punished himself over the years far more thoroughly than the Dementors ever could have. Do you have any idea what his life is like now? His living quarters at Hogwarts consist of an office, a bedroom and bathroom. He's got no family, no one you could call a friend except Dumbledore and Mel, he's stuck in a second-rate job he never would have chosen of his own volition, and you should see the state he's let himself get into physically. I'm telling you, you would never believe that he narrowly beat Sirius Black to the Most Fanciable Male Award in our final year."

"Severus Snape? Most Fanciable Male?" Arabella was clearly picturing her mental image of Severus next to her mental image of a Most Fanciable Male and failing completely to square the two.

"Oh yes." Caitlin grinned. "Sirius never did get over the shock. He was not a happy bunny."

"I can well believe it." Arabella returned. "I ran into Snape a couple of years ago in Diagon Alley, and he's not the most prepossessing of men, although I must admit he has the potential to look rather attractive, if he would just do something with that hair!"

"Exactly." The humour went out of Caitlin's voice. "He used to devote all his spare energies into looking good and keeping that hair presentable. Now he just doesn't seem to care. It's as if he doesn't think he deserves to look sexy anymore."

"Is that disappointment I see there, Caitlin?" Arabella teased.

"Might be." Caitlin muttered, the long habit of evasiveness with regards to her love life proving a hard one to break.

"Ah, you poor darling." cackled Arabella. "Well, never mind dear. He's always been rather fond of you, hasn't he? I'm sure if you asked him nicely and really turned on the charm, he'd smarten himself up for you."

"I doubt it." Caitlin sighed.

Both Arabella's eyebrows shot up at this. "What? You're not seriously telling me he's gone off you?"

Caitlin nodded mutely, not trusting herself to maintain her composure if she spoke. It was not a topic she really liked discussing in front of anyone, but especially not in front of Arabella Figg.

Arabella seemed unable to comprehend it. "But why? What happened? Severus Snape does not just go off people, not people he cares about anyway. It's either love or hate

with that man, but never inbetween. What did you do to change his mind?" Arabella's eyes narrowed, certain possibilities occurring to her. "Alright, Caitlin. What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Caitlin protested, hoping she sounded innocent. "We had a bit of a row, that's all." She glanced at Arabella, who did not look convinced in the slightest. Time to change the subject. "Tell me about Patrick. How is he these days?"

Arabella gave her a suspicious look but chose not to comment. Instead, she launched into one of her favourite topics - how her ex-son-in-law never let her see her granddaughter any more.

"As if I would know. I hardly ever see him. Moved to Cambridge after Louise died and took up a job in the library at their Muggle university. Broke his wand in two and said he never wanted anything to do with magic ever again. Married some Muggle woman and has lived as one of them ever since. Never mind that his family are all mages. Never mind that his children will be too. Never mind that his eldest happens to have a grandmother who'd like to see her now and again. No, we're not good enough for him. Did you know he didn't even tell Penelope about magic until she got her Hogwarts letter?" Arabella tutted indignantly. "Now I'm positively the last person to go on about the superiority of magical blood, but all the same, to have that heritage and not make your children aware of it is criminal! At least the younger ones found out as a result."

"Rachel and Paul, aren't they?" Caitlin didn't know the Clearwaters that well, but they had friends in common, and they'd always been well disposed towards her.

"You seem to know them better than I do." remarked Arabella sourly.

"They're in the year below Deanna's." replied Caitlin, offhandedly trying to play down any connections she might have with the Clearwaters. "I'm told that they're a Ravenclaw equivalent of the infamous Weasley twins, except their inventiveness tends to get channelled into productive things rather than pranks."

"I know." snapped Arabella. "Melissa told me. There's another one who knows more about my own family than I do. Why, of all the Muggles Patrick could have married, did he have to marry Melissa Lovegood's sister-in-law? Still, I suppose I should be grateful. It does give me one avenue of information on them all. I will give Melissa her due, she does believe in the importance of family."

Caitlin bit off the sharp retort that threatened to come out. Instead, she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Time to be going. She was expected at the Lovegood house soon.

"And on that note, I'd better leave you." she said lightly, getting up to leave. "Time is getting on, and Mel's expecting me. The Clearwaters'll be there too, I don't doubt. Anything you want me to say to them?"

"No. No there's nothing I want to say to them." Arabella sat there, resolute in her intention to make her errant son-in-law be the one to make the first move. Caitlin

shrugged, well used to Arabella's sour attitude by now and in no mood to force anything.

"Oh well. Have it your way. Be seeing you next year then."

"You off are you? That figures." It was Arabella's turn to shrug. "I'll just sit here then. All alone. On my own. By myself. On Christmas."

If Arabella had hoped to trigger any feelings of guilt on Caitlin's part, she was mistaken. Caitlin was not Louise Figg-Clearwater, and not possessed of her soft-heartedness.

"And whose fault is that, Arabella?" Caitlin responded tartly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do. Goodbye." And with that, she was gone, leaving Arabella to her own company.

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On the whole, Caitlin was not at all unhappy to be out of there. Arabella Figg was the only one person Caitlin knew who made her look like an eternally forgiving saint. Caitlin didn't blame Patrick for one minute for not keeping in touch after his wife died. Louise was the only one who'd ever had the sense of obligation and the patience to keep the contact going.

She rounded the corner back into Magnolia Crescent, the absurdly named Muggle street that Caitlin called home, at least until she could find a way to get the ancestral mansion rebuilt. Not that she didn't like the neighbourhood, but when you'd grown up in a house that put Malfoy Manor to shame, it took a lot of getting used to.

First stop was the Tyler bungalow. Caitlin paused briefly by the name-plate on the front gate as she always did. Partly tradition, and partly to deactivate the security wards. She traced her fingers along the lettering, gold on oak wood. "*Tal-y-Rhys Manor. No priests, no traders, no Malfoys.*" Caitlin always chuckled whenever she read that. All the big irritations of the Tal-y-Rhys summed up in one pithy sentence. No Tal-y-Rhys had ever had a good word for the Malfoys. None that didn't have four letters anyway. It was a feud that dated back centuries, right back to when Salazar Slytherin unwisely ditched Rowena Tal-y-Rhys, nicknamed Ravenclaw because she kept the birds as pets, for a Veela whose child would eventually marry into a family of Muggle aristocrats called de Malfois after Salazar decided he needed an army. Of course, their mage-born Malfoy descendants had gone to extreme lengths to cover up the rather embarrassing fact that their ancestors were Muggles, and had largely succeeded. However, the Tal-y-Rhys had known and remembered, which was why the Malfoys had hated them ever since. And why Caitlin, on hearing that Draco Malfoy had pushed his own cousin off the house Quidditch team by buying the rest of them the best brooms money could buy, had gone straight out and used her contacts to get the best brooms money couldn't buy for her daughter. Families, eh? Who'd have them? Caitlin thought with a wry grin as the wards dissolved to let her in.

A change of clothes later, into a blue dress with sewn-in black leather bodice, and Caitlin Tyler was once more ready to go. Time to pick Luella up.

The Martins' door was flung open by a strangely truculent Luella, looking very smart in black Muggle clothes. Unfortunately, the stylishness didn't redeem her oddly sulky demeanour.

"Hi, Luella. Merry Christmas." Caitlin gave her the brightest smile she could throw at her. Grown men had fallen to their knees gibbering when that smile had shone their way. Sadly, teenage girls appeared to be immune.

"Merry Christmas." The chill in Luella's voice matched the December air perfectly. She stepped out, closing and locking the door behind her. "Mum and Dad are off visiting. They said to say hello. Shall we go?"

Caitlin wasn't at all sure how to respond to that. "Erm... alright. Come on." She led Luella back to her own house. A neutral observer watching them would have been hard pressed to pick out the one with the vast family fortune and the centuries-old family tree. Caitlin was walking uncharacteristically nervously, while Luella practically stalked forward, head back, spine straight.

Caitlin could take it no more. Quite what was up with Luella, she had no idea, but she had no intention of cowering in front of a girl less than half her age, and with none of her experience. Once inside, she decided to confront her.

"OK, Luella. Out with it. What's bothering you?"

Luella didn't answer. She was prowling around the front room, gazing at the furniture. Without warning, she spun round, a worryingly manic glint in her eyes.

"Is this where it happened? Right here?"

"Where what happened?" Caitlin wasn't at all sure she liked the direction this conversation was headed in.

"I think we both know what, don't you?" Caitlin had never seen Luella angry before. It wasn't an attractive sight.

"Let us say I have forgotten." purred Caitlin. "Enlighten me." Two could play at verbal fencing, Caitlin thought. After all, Luella was only fourteen, and not a master yet.

Luella laughed. "Forgotten? Does all the torturing start to blur together after a while? You know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about Severus Snape."

"Professor Snape to you." Caitlin hissed. This, in her daughter's words, was going to be so not fun.

"Don't come the responsible adult with me." fumed Luella. "What the hell did you do to him? Wait, no." She stopped Caitlin with a wave of her hand. "Spare me the details, I'd really rather not know. Just tell me this. Did you torture Professor Snape?"

Caitlin sighed, the fight going out of her. No sense denying it, Luella clearly knew, although how, Caitlin had no idea. "Yes. Yes, I did."

Luella blinked, the admission taking her by surprise. For a while, she just stared. Then, the prowling started again, and this time the rage was a lot more obvious.

"Damn you." she whispered. "Damn you!" She spun back to face Caitlin again. "Why??" she screamed at her.

Now it was Caitlin's turn to be wrongfooted. Looking back, she realised that she hadn't the faintest idea why she'd done it. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. All the suppressed and not-so-suppressed rage, hate, resentment and desire for revenge had just boiled together at once and she'd just let go. Now though... Now she'd give anything not to have done it.

"I don't know." she sighed. "He caught me at a bad time, and he just looked so self-satisfied and patronising, I couldn't take it. He was acting like he owned me, you know? Trying to tell me what to do with my life, when he forfeited that particular right a long time ago. Set off the famous Tyler temper straight away. And then I started to get the upper hand, and before I knew it, I was just doing it. All the anger I've been carrying around for years just burst out before I could stop it."

"That is no excuse!" Luella snarled back at her. "Plenty of people got hurt during the war. They don't go round looking for revenge, do they? Why the hell did you have to? And you an Auror too!"

"Which just goes to prove that you don't know what you're talking about!" Caitlin retorted. "I didn't go looking for revenge; I hid from it for years. Revenge found me. And it was vastly aided by my knowing who one of my attackers was, and by the fact that he was fool enough to be alone with me. Luella, what the hell did you expect?" Had she thought the fight had gone out of her? Well, it was certainly back now. Luella was entitled to her opinions, but under no circumstances was she going to allow a fourteen year old who hadn't got a clue about how it had really felt to pass judgement on her. "Forgiveness? Mercy? Tolerance? What do you think I am, some kind of saint? Some kind of martyr? We Slytherins have a saying about martyrs, Luella. A martyr's just someone who couldn't afford a good enough lawyer. And Hera knows, very few Tal-y-Rhys have ever been in *that* position. You think what you like of me. But until you too have suffered what I did or something similar, and got over it without wanting revenge, don't even think about judging me. Because I am not going to allow myself to feel guilty about what other people think of me."

"So you don't actually give a damn about ruining his life then."

Caitlin fought back the urge to slap her. "Actually, I do. Believe it or not, I actually regret it now. And I did apologise to him. In fact, now he knows how it felt I can forgive him. Maybe what I did was necessary for that. Because now he's been punished, really punished. Now he knows how it felt, not just for me, but for every one of his victims. Which is more than I can say for you."

She couldn't have sworn to it, but for a brief moment she saw something like guilt flicker in Luella's eyes. But it was soon gone.

"I don't need to have been raped to know what's right or wrong, Caitlin."

"Maybe not. But there's a world of difference between knowing what's right and having the moral strength to actually do it. And you never know whether you've got it or not until you've been tested." Caitlin fixed Luella with the steeliest gaze she could muster, daring the teenager to contradict her. To her satisfaction, she noted Luella starting to squirm. Excellent. Moralising tendencies were best off nipped in the bud, before they bloomed into hypocrisy. Not good at all for a Slytherin to have too idealistic a view of human nature, not even the Redeemer.

However, Luella soon shook off her discomfort. "Well, you failed there, didn't you? Gave in to your worst impulses straight away, didn't you? Yes, I know what he did was wrong. I know you had every right to feel angry. But why, why, did you have to sink to his level?" Luella's anger began to deteriorate into sobbing as she collapsed into a chair, huddled up, head buried in her hands, the fury dissolving into sobs as she started to look like nothing so much as a frightened child. "Why did you have to lash out like that? Why'd you have to let your temper get the better of you? Do you have any idea what you did to him? Mentally, I mean. You didn't see him afterwards. You didn't have to watch him try and deal with it. You didn't have to pick up the pieces afterwards. Why did you have to drag me into all this?" she wept. "Couldn't you have just left me not knowing?"

It slowly began to dawn on Caitlin what must have happened. No one from Hogwarts had been in touch about a possible attack on Severus Snape, so he must have encountered someone on arrival who'd helped him and agreed to keep it quiet. That much she had worked out long ago. Now she knew who it must have been.

She walked over to where Luella was sitting and perched on the side of the chair. If there was one thing guaranteed to melt Caitlin's icy exterior in seconds, it was someone crying, especially a child. Caitlin, underneath the usual harshness, was a lot more sentimental than she let on. If Severus had but known it, all he'd have had to do to win her over would have been to cry. Too late now, and Caitlin wasn't at all certain it'd work the other way around, not without Glamoury anyway. However, Luella was the focus of her attention now.

"I'm sorry." she whispered, taking the sobbing girl in her arms and stroking her hair in an attempt to soothe her. "I'm so, so sorry. I never meant for you to be involved in this, I really didn't. I'm so sorry I upset you."

"Bit late now, isn't it?" The resentment hadn't really dimmed much. However, despite her angry words, Luella was beginning to waver, leaning in to Caitlin and allowing herself to be comforted. Caitlin smiled. Luella wasn't really the type to bear grudges and they both knew it.

"I know, I know. But that doesn't mean I don't regret it. Luella, I'm sorry, I really am. And not just for upsetting you either." Caitlin added. "I wasn't entirely in my right mind that night. In fact, I don't think I've been entirely in my right mind for years. I

just acted without thinking. And I've not stopped regretting it ever since. Don't think I don't feel guilty! I do. I really do. I'd give anything to undo it, if I could. Anything at all." Caitlin's eyes started to mist over as visions of what could have been drifted into her mind. Yes, she'd give anything at all to have Severus trying to seduce her now.

She was brought abruptly back to reality by Luella speaking once more. The sobbing appeared to have subsided, but she was still far from happy.

"I used to really look up to you, you know." she whispered. "You weren't like anyone else I knew. You just seemed completely all-powerful, never letting anything or anyone stand in your way. You never seemed to care what anyone thought, and I loved that. And you were a lot more easygoing than my family. I just thought you were amazing, you know? Just so cool and so fascinating. I loved being around you, loved listening to you talk. I used to fantasise about really being your kid, and that my parents had just adopted me for some reason, or about my parents dying and me going to live with you and Deanna. I thought you were perfect in every way. Not any more." The bitter laugh which followed did nothing to hide the pain and disappointment beneath.

"Oh, Luella." sighed Caitlin, pulling her that bit closer. "I didn't know you felt that way. But I'm only human, love. And I'm not perfect, never have been. No one is, you know. Guess you had to find out sooner or later. Another Slytherin saying: never look up to anyone. You'll only get a sore neck."

Luella was too upset to really appreciate the joke, but she did manage a smile. "I know, but you always seemed different. You and Professor Snape both. You both seemed so much larger than life. Completely unstoppable, you know? Like nothing could stand in your way, and nothing could hurt you. Do you know what I mean?"

Caitlin stifled a chuckle. Yes, she knew. She'd often heard Mel comment that Caitlin and Severus were the two people most likely to get somewhere in life without having to do much for it, Caitlin by sheer force of personality and Severus because potential obstacles would take one look at him and decide that perhaps it might be a good idea to bother someone else instead. Neither Slytherin had ever been considered someone you'd want as an enemy. And in their own different ways, she by means of a charm offensive, and Severus by being, well, Severus, they'd both been equally adept at keeping their real selves hidden.

"Yes, I know alright. And I suppose you can't think that anymore, can you?"

"No. I mean, the two of you have always made me feel safe, made me feel protected. I was never really that scared about being Slytherin Redeemer, because I had you two there looking out for me. I always thought you two between you would be able to protect me. Not now. It's like, before you were these superhuman figures capable of standing up to anything, and now you're just two ordinary people as vulnerable as anyone. And I'm scared."

"So that's what it's about." Caitlin murmured, stroking Luella's hair. "Should have guessed. Listen, Luella. I know you feel scared, but don't be. We're still the same people, you know. And while we're not perfect, you're forgetting that I'm one of the

Ministry's best Aurors, while he's an ex-spy with plenty of practical experience at fighting the Dark Arts. I assure you, you're in good hands! Don't be frightened. Severus and I might have our differences, but neither of us would ever let them get in the way of looking after you. That I can promise you."

Caitlin felt Luella squeeze her hand in gratitude. "I know you wouldn't. But it's still not the same though. It's not like it was before."

"No, I suppose not." sighed Caitlin, still continuing to hold Luella in the way that she'd done with Deanna on those occasions when she too had been frightened or upset, not that Deanna would ever admit to it now. "You should never have been involved in this. It's not your fight, it's not your responsibility, and you have quite enough to deal with without this as well. How did you find out anyway?" Might as well get her suspicions confirmed while she was here.

"I saw him." came the muffled reply. "I couldn't sleep so I went to his office for some Sleeping Potion. He was just coming in as I got there. We talked and I healed him. He wouldn't tell me what happened though. You should have seen him, Caitlin, he looked so empty. So lost. So desolate. Like his whole world had just fallen apart. I lost count of how many shots of brandy he had, but they weren't small measures, any of them." Luella dried her eyes and looked up at Caitlin. "I hated seeing him like that, Caitlin. Hated it. I mean, I coped at the time, but afterwards..." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was so worried about him! And scared too. So frightened he wouldn't be able to cope anymore. Scared you two wouldn't be able to protect me if you were always fighting. Damn it, Caitlin, why the hell are you two always at each others' throats? Can't you just get along?" There was a note of frustrated petulance there that reminded Caitlin eerily of Deanna. But it was better by far than the coldness she'd been met with earlier.

"I wish we could!" sighed Caitlin. "I really, really wish we could. But he doesn't want to know anymore. Not that I blame him, mind, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. How ironic. As soon as I realise I want him, he changes his mind. Typical."

"Typical bloody men, eh?" murmured Luella, starting to smile again.

"Something like that." smiled Caitlin, relieved to see Luella cheering up. However, there was still one thing weighing on her mind. "I mean, I know he was hurt, but fancy taking out his problems on a fourteen year old girl! What the hell was he thinking of? And once again, guess who's got to handle the fall out. Me again. I'd give him a piece of my mind, except I suppose it's a little bit rich of me to complain after causing the whole mess in the first place."

"Don't blame him, Caitlin." whispered Luella. "It's not his fault. He did tell me to go to bed when I first saw him, but I refused. And I don't think he could help himself. He was that messed up. Probably a good thing I was there, god knows what might have happened if he'd been on his own."

Caitlin felt herself going pale. "Don't! I don't want to think about that!"

She heard Luella chuckle in response. "Knew you liked him really."

"Well, of course I do. He's intelligent, witty and charming, what more could a woman want? But that's beside the point." Caitlin returned her attention to the topic at hand. "He had absolutely no right to involve you. It's not your problem! At least, it shouldn't have been. Damn him." She lifted Luella's chin, gazing into eyes still rimmed with tears. "I'm sorry, Luella. I really am."

"I believe you." whispered Luella. However, Caitlin could tell that she wasn't entirely forgiven. Understood, yes. Forgiven, no. Caitlin could still detect an inkling of resentment for beginning the demolition of her childhood illusions. She only hoped that Luella would one day get over it - after all, it had to have happened sooner or later although Demeter only knew that this wasn't really the way Caitlin would have chosen. Still, it was a start. Caitlin loosened her grip on the girl as she sat up and began to wipe the tearstains away.

"Feeling better?" she asked. Luella nodded.

"Yeah, a bit. Got a tissue?"

Caitlin reached for the Kleenex box. Luella took one gratefully, blowing her nose and drying her eyes.

"Still want to go to the party?" A silly question, perhaps. But Caitlin wouldn't have blamed Luella for not feeling up to socialising.

"Course I do. I'd like to see Marls again, and besides I'll never hear the end of it if I wuss out." Her smile didn't entirely reach her eyes. However, Caitlin didn't have time to worry about it, as her fireplace roared into life. Luella took one look at it and screamed. Caitlin turned round and relaxed to see Melissa's head in the flames.

"Hey, Mel. Merry Christmas! How's tricks?"

"How's tricks, she says. How's tricks? I have a party to organise, and it's going crazily off-schedule, thanks to the Auror Who Is Never On Time. Caitlin, are you coming to this party or not?" Melissa did not look pleased. Caitlin checked her watch. Quarter to five. Oops. She hadn't realised it was so late.

"Um, yeah, course we are. Luella and I had some things we needed to discuss, that's all."

"Well, discuss it later. You should have been here half an hour ago. I've got eight hungry teenagers and my in-laws all getting restless, a house-elf who's run off her feet what with all the cooking and a husband who's being absolutely no help whatsoever, will you please get a move on so I can start getting the dinner underway? Twiglets and prawn crackers will only keep the masses quiet for so long!"

"Don't remember that one in the Rules." grinned Caitlin. Melissa didn't see the funny side.

"Caitlin! Stop being facetious. I will be launching Christmas dinner in twenty minutes whether you are here or not. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Mel."

"Good. Now hurry up." And with that, she was gone. Caitlin couldn't help chuckling.

"Typical Mel. Even Christmas has to be meticulously planned according to a timetable." She noticed Luella staring at the fire in shock. "What, never seen the Remote Floo in action before?"

"Is that what it was?" Luella asked, still dazed.

"It is indeed. Rather like a magical equivalent of the telephone, except as it's done via Floo, you can send items and even people through as well."

Luella seemed to calm down a bit. "Wait a second, I think I have seen it done before. Didn't Professor Snape use it to get in touch with you that night Voldemort tried to nick the Philosopher's Stone?"

"He did indeed. Well done for remembering. But I digress. We'd better use the Floo proper, I don't want to keep Mel waiting. You ready?"

Luella nodded and walked over to the fire. However, she stopped short when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

"Oh my god, what do I look like?" she gasped. "My eyes are all red, I can't go looking like this!"

Caitlin had to admit that Luella had looked better. However, there were ways around this sort of thing.

"Not to worry, my dear. I think we can sort this out. Ever worn make-up before?"

Luella shook her head. "No. Mum and Dad reckon I'm too young for it."

"Well then, it's about time you tried it. You'll be amazed at the difference. Come on. By the time I'm done, you won't know yourself. Go and wash your face, then meet me in my bedroom and we'll get started."

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Caitlin was as good as her word. Luella, on seeing the final result in Caitlin's bedroom mirror, couldn't believe her eyes.

"Are you sure this isn't a magic mirror?" she demanded. Caitlin shook her hand, laughing.

"No, I promise you! It's a perfectly normal Muggle mirror."

Luella turned to look at her reflection again. "Wow." she whispered. Caitlin's expert touch had transformed her from an ordinary looking teenager into some exotic stranger. Very nice. She wondered what Deanna would say if she could see her now.

Malfoy's reaction would also be worth seeing. Not to mention that of Professor Snape. Luella's mind drifted off into fantasies of Snape taking one look at her and immediately falling on his knees pledging undying love.

She was brought abruptly back to reality by Caitlin calling her name.

"Luella? Luella, snap out of it! Yes, I know you're pretty, but not so pretty you can fall in love with your own reflection!"

"Sorry, I was just..."

"Admiring yourself, yes I know." Despite the somewhat reproving tone of her voice, Caitlin was smiling. "Don't worry, I was much the same the first time I wore some. Come on, we don't have much time. Let's show you off, shall we?"

The reaction at the Lovegoods' party was much as Luella had hoped for. Marlie took one look at her and promptly screamed at the top of her voice "Oh my god! You're wearing make-up!"

"So? You do it all the time." Luella swiftly drew a glamour around them both, not at all happy about being the centre of attention all of a sudden.

"Yeah, but you don't! My god, this is really weird. Like Deanna wearing a dress, or McGonagall getting a tattoo, or Snape shaving his head and joining a punk band!" Marlie stared at her, enthralled. "Looks pretty good though."

"Caitlin did it." Luella admitted. "Reckoned that seeing as it was Christmas, I should be allowed to tart myself up a bit."

"Well, she did a good job. Think she'll give me a makeover?"

"You don't need one, Marls." It was true. Marlie was the kind of girl born knowing how to apply make-up like a professional.

"I know, but it would be interesting to see the results." Marlie turned away, and led Luella towards the rest of the party, which included a lot of people who Luella didn't recognise, but from the look of them, were probably related to Marlie in some way.

"Who are all these people?" she asked in bewilderment.

She immediately regretted asking. Marlie launched straight into her socialite routine, dragging her over to a middle-aged couple nearby.

"These two are my aunt and uncle on my dad's side. This is my aunt, Annabel Lovegood, my dad's sister and a professor of astrophysics at Cambridge, and this is her husband Patrick Clearwater who's the head librarian in the science department. Aunt Anna, Uncle Patrick, this is my schoolfriend Luella Martin."

Annabel Lovegood turned to Luella with a smile. Much like her brother, she seemed laidback, friendly and outgoing - the typical Lovegood family traits according to

Marlie. She also had the rich, golden blonde hair that both Leonard and Mike shared (as opposed to the pale, almost white, blonde hair that Marlie had inherited) matched with a pair of inquisitive blue eyes easily fascinated by anything or anyone that might cross their path.

"So you're Luella! Nice to finally meet you, everyone's been telling us lots about you."

"Have they?" Luella wasn't at all sure she liked the idea of all these people knowing about her without her even knowing they existed.

"Oh yes. Melissa reckons you're destined for great things, although she won't say exactly what. I've heard you're quite ambitious too."

"Well, I-" Luella started to speak, until Marlie butted in.

"Of course she is, she's a Slytherin. We all are. Although it's a bit more obvious with some of us than others."

"No need to tell me that, young Marlie, we all know you are!" Annabel teased. "If it's not that sport you play, it's that other crazy idea of yours, now what was it? Turning yourself into an animal or something?"

"Animagism, and it's not crazy! It's a perfectly reasonable ambition!" Marlie protested.

Annabel rolled her eyes. "I'll believe it when I see it. You do know it's against the laws of physics, don't you? There's not nearly enough energy in the world to achieve it, and no way of harnessing it. Plus it is not possible to change the form of your cells like that."

"There's more than enough energy out there, Auntie, you just need to take it from somewhere it's going to waste and use it for your own needs. All that heat and light from the sun, most of it just goes straight out into space and dissipates. No harm taking a bit of it to power Transfigurations, is there? And as for shapeshifting, it's quite straightforward once you've attuned your subtle bodies to that of your totem animal. Once they're done, the physical body eventually changes right along with it. Easy!"

"I notice you've not mastered it yet." Annabel pointed out.

"Well, no." Marlie admitted. "But it is very advanced magic. And I'm quite close to a breakthrough, I'm sure of it! Rachel and Paul are helping me out and they reckon I'll be capable of it in a few years or so, maybe less."

"Oh wonderful!" Annabel rolled her eyes. "Now you're infecting my lot with it! What do they teach you at this school of yours?"

"Magic." Luella and Marlie answered automatically. Annabel just shook her head, clearly giving up on them both. She was saved from having to argue any further by the appearance of her older brother.

"Marlie driving you up the wall again, is she?" he asked jovially.

"You guessed! Yes, she's on about - what was it again? Animation?"

"Animagism. Dad, she won't believe it's possible. Tell her!"

Leonard Lovegood just laughed. "Marls, as I've never seen it done before, I can't comment. Tell you what though, when you've mastered it, you can give us all a demonstration at the next Christmas party and prove her wrong. OK?"

"Alright then." shrugged Marlie. "You got a deal."

"Leonard, are you even going to attempt to talk sense into her?" Annabel demanded.

"No point. I used to try and tell Mel magic wasn't possible, but after she'd proved me wrong for the hundredth time, I gave in. Now I find it's easiest to just accept it all as it comes."

"I see. Leonard, you're a civil avionics engineer. You're not seriously telling me you believe magic keeps planes airborne? Because if so, I'm never flying again."

"Of course not, sis. Jet engines keep planes in the sky. Magic keeps brooms in the air. One rule for Muggle technology, one rule for magical stuff, and never the twain shall meet, at least not until our kids start messing around at any rate. Come on, dinnertime." He led her off towards the dining room.

Luella turned to Marlie. "Is she always like that?"

"Oh yeah. You get used to it after a while. She makes Carl Sagan look like Uri Geller. It's the academic background, you see. She spends most of her life cloistered with the same people, all with the same sceptical reality-tunnel, all reinforcing each others' views. My dad, on the other hand, has to interact with the real world, and that's mellowed him out a lot."

Luella was still digesting all this. "But how can she stay so sceptical when you lot are all there to prove her wrong?"

"Well, Uncle Patrick doesn't do magic any more, and the kids aren't allowed to at home, and she only sees us at Christmas. So she doesn't really have to acknowledge it in any way. I think she thinks Hogwarts is just a typical Muggle school, or at least, chooses to think of it that way so as to avoid entertaining the idea of magic."

Luella nodded in recognition. "My parents do that too. What is it with Muggles, Marls? Why do they find the idea so disturbing?"

"Gods know." shrugged Marlie. "Come on, let's get some food down us, I've only eaten Twiglets and crisps since breakfast. I'm starving!" She headed for the dining room.

Luella was about to follow her, when something caught her eye. Marlie's uncle, Patrick Clearwater. He'd not said anything during the conversation. Luella had decided that he must be the quiet, retiring type and left it at that. However, on looking at him closely, she revised her opinion. He was staring at her as if in some kind of trance, and had been since they'd been introduced, she realised. And he was making her feel very uncomfortable.

"Mr. Clearwater?" she asked, trying to dispel the tension. "Is everything alright?"

He shook himself. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. It's just that... You remind me of someone I used to know, that's all. You're a friend of Marlie's, aren't you?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. We're at Hogwarts together."

"I suppose you're a Slytherin too, yes?"

"That's right."

Patrick nodded as if to himself. A brief look of disappointment crossed his face, then he seemed to snap out of it, smiling at her.

Luella felt her heart leap into her mouth as an eerie sense of déjà vu began creeping up her spine. This black-haired, blue-eyed stranger, old enough to be her father, suddenly seemed familiar to her, very familiar. She began to realise how he must have felt. She knew him, surely. And yet she also knew she'd never met him before in her life. Strange. Very strange. However, it wasn't entirely unwelcome. Slowly, she found her uneasiness melting away, as she began to warm to him. She liked him, she decided.

"So who do I remind you of?" she asked, good-naturedly.

"My ex-wife, believe it or not. Your surname's not Figg, by any chance, is it?"

Luella shook her head. "No. It's Martin."

"No Figgs in your family?"

"None that I can remember. My mum's maiden name's Carroll."

"Oh." Patrick seemed to deflate a little. "Ah well. Must be one of those synchronicities that my current wife, bless her, steadfastly refuses to believe in despite the evidence of her own eyes."

"You're a believer then, I take it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Patrick chuckled. "Believe me, there's nothing I find more amusing than reading the studies produced by Muggles trying to explain psychic phenomena, whether they're sceptics or believers. However, that's beside the point. I don't need to believe, Luella. I've seen it. I'm a wizard."

Luella looked him up and down. He was dressed in perfectly normal Muggle clothes, jeans, grey woollen sweater and a pair of brown loafers much like the sort her father wore. Not a wand, cloak or pointy hat in sight.

"You don't look much like a wizard."

"No. I don't." The smile faded. "I've lived as a Muggle for fifteen years now. I don't own a wand any more, I don't do magic any more. I maintain as little contact with the magical world as possible, and what contact I do have is with my parents and brother, or stuff involving the kids. I married Annabel precisely because she refused to believe in or accept anything remotely supernatural. Of course, it wasn't until it was far too late that I discovered her brother was married to Melissa Harker. Still, you can't have everything, and it's not as if this is a typical magical home after all." He indicated the wide-screen TV, and the stereo system that dominated the far wall, things not found in most mage homes. The Tylers certainly didn't have either. Nor for that matter did the Stormosis.

Luella remembered Marlie's words. "Uncle Patrick doesn't use magic any more." Most odd. Why would a wizard voluntarily renounce his powers? It didn't make sense. She'd only been a witch for four years, and already she couldn't imagine going back to being a Muggle again. It would be like losing a limb. Apart from getting horribly maimed or mutilated in an accident, or losing a loved one, she couldn't imagine anything worse.

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Clearwater..."

"Please, call me Patrick."

"Alright then. If you don't mind me asking, Patrick... why'd you give up magic?"

He hesitated. For a moment, Luella wondered if she'd said the wrong thing. But at length, he did answer her.

"Because some of my fellow mages did something so horrific, so truly awful, using the most dangerous and evil magic ever invented, that I couldn't bear to be a part of that world any more. Don't ask me what it was, I still don't like talking about it. Suffice it to say that it was enough to make me decide that if that was what so-called purebloods were like, I'd rather have the Muggles."

Purebloods... fifteen years ago... something so bad he still couldn't talk about it... There was only one possible conclusion to be drawn.

"Voldemort." she whispered. Patrick froze, and Luella knew she'd hit the mark.

"What did you say?" he hissed.

"It was him, wasn't it? Or his followers." Luella gathered her courage and looked him straight in the eye. "Lord Voldemort was behind it, wasn't he?"

"Don't say the name!" Patrick nearly screamed at her, screwing up his eyes in pain. "For the love of God, don't say it! Just don't!" He took a few deep breaths and opened his eyes again. "Yes. Alright, yes. It was him. Look, don't ask me any more questions. I don't want to talk about it!"

Luella nodded. Fair enough, really. No point pushing him before he was ready. Ready for what, a small voice asked her. Healing, she answered it, without knowing where the words came from. Don't I wear the caduceus after all? She reached out with her left hand and brushed his cheek with her fingertips, gazing straight into his eyes and turning on the Glamoury. She felt her Mark heat up as the power began to flow.

"Relax." she whispered. "Relax, and be calm. Forget I brought the topic up. Only relax. For now is not the time to open the wound. When you are ready. Not before."

She watched him go into the familiar trance. The Mark was still smouldering slightly. Quite a nice sensation when you got used to it, she thought as she let her hand fall back to her side. So much more pleasant when you were in control of the power for once.

Patrick blinked and emerged from the trance. Luella looked into his eyes again, to check he was OK. And found herself switched into another world entirely.

She was lying on the floor, in a room she didn't recognise yet knew without a doubt was her own front room. Not far away, Patrick was standing watching her. Except he seemed to have lost ten years somewhere along the line, the lines under the eyes having smoothed themselves out, and the grey hairs around his temples their original black. That wasn't what shocked her though. No, that was the look in his eyes, the vacant look that indicated that Patrick Clearwater's mind was far, far gone.

In that instant, she knew that he was not there, that someone had him under their control and that he couldn't help himself. And that that person was standing to her left.

She turned to face the hooded, grey-robed figure controlling him. His face was hidden from her, but the eyeholes in the hood left his eyes on view. That was enough.

"You'll regret this." she heard herself gasping. "I swear it, you'll regret this. By the power of the Most High Gods, may your conscience wake from the coma you've beaten it into and never cease to torment you until you've paid for what you've done. And may you too know what it's like to see someone you love suffer like this. And this also I promise - in my next life, I'll find you. Oh yes. I'll find you. You won't escape from me that easily! So mote it be!"

"Very poetic." he sneered at her, his voice hauntingly familiar, especially that particular tone of it. "But it won't help you now, will it?" He turned to Patrick, raising his wand. "Finish her."

She shut her eyes as she heard the words every mage most dreaded, spoken by the voice she'd once most loved to hear. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

"Nooo!" she cried. But it was too late. She felt the curse hit her, and knew no more.

Until she opened her eyes again and found herself back in the Lovegoods' front room. Patrick was shaking her, calling her name.

"What?" she snapped, trying to wriggle away. He let her go, relieved.

"You tell me!" He was staring wildly at her, half in amazement, half in fear. "What happened there? You looked into my eyes, everything went blurry, then I came out of it and you were in some kind of trance. Luella, what's going on?"

Back came the Glamoury. "Nothing." lied Luella. "I was just thinking, that's all. Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing at all."

"If you say so." Patrick still seemed suspicious, but the Glamoury had worked - he was no longer panic-stricken. "But there is a lot more going on with you than meets the eye, of that I am certain."

Luella didn't know what to say to that. Fortunately, Caitlin Tyler saved her the trouble.

"Of course there is, she's a Slytherin. We've all got at least one deep, dark secret tucked away, and most of us have several. I wouldn't let it bother you."

She peeled away from the doorway she'd been leaning against and sashayed into the room, oozing Glamoury.

"You'd better go and join the others, they'll be wondering where you've got to." she smiled. "Go on, get in there. Enjoy your Christmas."

Patrick nodded wordlessly, before making a swift exit to the dining room where everyone else was gathered. Caitlin watched him go, with something like sadness in her eyes, before abruptly switching off the Glamoury and turning to Luella.

"Well?"

"Caitlin, I -"

"Pried where you shouldn't have done and tried to use Glamoury as a quick fix. I saw, Luella. No, don't worry, I'm not about to shout at you. But in the future, please leave people's secrets well alone!"

"Sorry." muttered Luella. She looked up. "Caitlin, what did happen to him? Do you know?"

"Oh, I know alright." Caitlin said quietly. "But now is not the time. We'll talk about it later. For now, Mel is expecting us both for dinner. And you will go in there, eat up, relax, and act like a normal fourteen year old having Christmas dinner. Alright?"

"Yes, Caitlin." Luella said, subdued.

"Good." Caitlin's smile returned, as reproof gave way to tenderness. "Come on then. Let's go and mingle."

The Christmas dinner proved to be well worth the wait. Just about every dish ever associated with Christmas was there for the eating, and the assembled guests lost no time diving in.

Luella found herself sitting next to a girl she recognised as a Ravenclaw prefect from school, but whose name she hadn't managed to catch. However, the mass of curly black hair indicated that she was almost certainly related to Patrick Clearwater in some way.

Marlie was seated opposite Luella, in between two other youngsters who had been introduced as her Clearwater cousins, Rachel and Paul. No mistaking the Lovegood genes at work there - they both had their mother's inquisitive blue eyes, and were a match for Marlie with their mixture of technical know-how and rampant extroversion. Rachel seemed to be the more outgoing of the two, shaking back her mane of blonde curls as she argued with Marlie over whether it would ever be possible to adapt a radio for use at Hogwarts.

"Marls, the signal would never penetrate the magical field, you'd need a satellite dish the size of Norwich to pick it up."

"Cous, you're not thinking! We set up a receiver *outside* the field and run the signal into Hogwarts via a unicorn hair cable. Once we've got it in the castle, we can send it back into the ether and pick it up anywhere."

"It all sounds rather fiddly and complicated." frowned Paul, the quieter of the two. He seemed to take more after his father, having the same black hair and reflective attitude. "I foresee a lot of kinks to be ironed out here."

"Exactly!" Marlie enthused. "Think of the challenge!"

"It'll take ages." mused Rachel. "There'll be more technical things than we've ever dealt with before to be sorted out. All kinds of research to be done. Lots of testing too." She sighed blissfully. "Heaven!"

The girl next to Luella shook her head ruefully. "Look at them. Geeks the pair of them. And Marlie's no better, giving them ideas like that. Honestly, they'll be obsessing over this for months now. It'll be almost as bad as when they were trying to back-engineer the Walkmage. Bits everywhere, the Ravenclaw common room was a tip for months."

"Did they manage it?" Luella asked, intrigued despite herself.

"They did. And when Marlie found out, she immediately made them partners in the business. They now do the Ravenclaw end of things, and they've got more cash than I have." She sniffed disapprovingly before turning back to Luella with a smile. "I don't think we've been introduced, have we? I'm Penelope Clearwater. Fifth year Ravenclaw, Prefect. And you?"

"Luella Martin. Muggle-born Slytherin fourth year. Friend of Marlie's." They shook hands. "Are you related to Patrick Clearwater then? You look a lot like him."

"It's the hair, isn't it?" laughed Penelope, holding a strand up for Luella to see. "Always gives it away. Can't say I care for it myself."

"I think it looks fine." Luella told her.

"If you say so, but I really wish it wasn't so curly. Your hair now, that's the kind of hair I'd like." Penelope regarded Luella's hair with outright envy. "Straight but not so straight it's uninteresting. Proper movie star hair. And the colour's really nice too."

"It's not that good really." Luella blushed, her usual reaction on being made a fuss of. "It only looks this nice because I've been styling it all afternoon."

"Well it's still better than mine. Ah, if only genetics had gone the other way, I too could have had hair like that." sighed Penelope. "My mother's hair was just like yours."

Luella turned to look at Annabel. No similarity there - hers was blonde for a start. Then it dawned on Luella that Penelope had spoken of her mother in the past tense, and that Patrick had said she looked like his ex-wife.

"No, not Annabel Lovegood." Penelope had obviously noticed Luella turn round and guessed her assumption. "She's really my stepmother, although I still call her Mum. My real mother died when I was just a baby. I don't remember her, although I do know she was a witch too. I've got photos though, and she looks a lot like you. In fact..." She reached for her purse, opened it, and produced a rather battered looking photo. "See for yourself."

Luella took the photo from her. What she saw caused her heart to skip a beat. It was like looking in a mirror, almost. Admittedly this woman was older than Luella, and dressed in robes, topped with a Seventies hairstyle, but all the same, that didn't disguise the fact that there was a disturbing resemblance. Same eyes, same hair, same nose, same cheekbones. About the only difference was the look in her eyes. She was smiling, but the eyes contained a quiet desperation that belied the happiness. What Luella most registered about her was that this woman was deeply unhappy.

"She looks so sad." Luella whispered.

"You noticed that." Penelope did not sound surprised in the least. "I always wondered about that too. Dad tells me she was forever getting bullied by her mother though, so maybe that has something to do with it. I think she wanted a career too, but felt her mother wouldn't approve, so she got married instead. I do feel sorry for her sometimes. Poor thing, she must have been so trapped."

"I'll bet." Luella found herself trying to imagine what it must have been like for her, having all sorts of dreams, intelligence and the typical Ravenclaw curiosity, and finding herself trapped by motherhood instead. I could never have put up with that,

thought Luella. Never. I'd have gone nuts. In fact, I'd never have let it happen in the first place.

Well, maybe that's why you're a Slytherin this time around, she heard a small voice responding in the back of her mind.

Luella blinked. This time around? Did that mean she'd lived before? Surely not. And yet she'd heard the others talking about past lives before, so who knew? She brushed the thought out of her mind, and handed the photo back to Penelope.

"Strange how you look just like her, though." the other girl was saying, looking at Luella with eyes that she now realised were the same shade of silvery-blue as her own. "Maybe you're related somehow. Any Figgs in your family?"

"Your dad asked me the same question. No, I don't think there are. I'm pretty certain there's none on my dad's side and my mum's maiden name's Carroll."

Penelope did not seem too put out by this news. "Hmm. Well then, maybe you're related to my maternal grandmother instead. Does the name Arabella Figg ring any bells?"

"Arabella Figg, Arabella Figg..." Luella thought hard. She didn't recall the name and yet in the back of her mind, it sounded familiar. Then it came to her. "My great aunt's called Arabella. But I don't see her much because Mum doesn't really get on with her. She always was a bit strange - she got selected by this obscure boarding school at age eleven totally out of the blue, went off there, got married to a schoolmate and virtually disappeared after that. Mum and Dad reckon that if she'd lived a hundred years ago she'd have been burned as a witch..." Her voice trailed off. "No way."

"Yes way." grinned Penelope. "I think we just found the missing link here, don't you? Your great aunt Arabella must be my maternal grandmother. So what does that makes us? Second cousins?"

"Something like that, yes." Luella sat back in shock. "My god, why did I never see it before? She's a witch, she must be, that's the only explanation. Wow, that means I'm not the only witch in my family. I'm not a random fluke, the magical genes really were in there all along. Cool!" Indeed. And not just for that reason. The presence of other mages in her ancestral line, and the maternal one at that, made it a lot more plausible that she really was Morgan's Heir, a direct female-line descendant of Salazar Slytherin's daughter. The thought warmed her heart. It made her destiny that bit more natural. She hadn't been chosen at random after all, it was part and parcel of her identity, of her bloodline. It was something she'd been born to do. Mudblood, eh? she thought to herself, grinning as she recalled Draco's reaction to the first attack. Not anymore! Enemies of the Heir beware, indeed! And you, Malfoy, are right up on the list!

She smiled at Penelope, her new-found relative. All through her time at Hogwarts, she'd heard her fellow Slytherins brag about their relatives and felt left out because she couldn't do the same. And now, finally, she had some mage-born kin of her own. Life had never looked better.

Virtually the first thing she did after dinner was track down Caitlin, who was propped up against the mantelpiece in the Lovegoods' front room, talking to Melissa. News this good just had to be shared.

"Caitlin!" she gasped. "Caitlin, guess what?"

"What?" Caitlin smiled indulgently. Several glasses of red wine later, and Caitlin was in a good mood, and consequently far more tolerant than usual of excitable fourteen year olds.

"I might have magical relatives! Isn't that cool?"

"Wonderful, darling. Absolutely fascinating. Unless they're Malfoys. Then I might have to kill you."

Melissa rolled her eyes and summoned her house-elf. "Sukey dear, Caitlin is a little the worse for wear. Be so good as to fetch a glass of Sobriety Potion, and if you can make it look like a glass of Chardonnay, so much the better."

"As you wish, Mrs. Lovegood." Sukey disappeared and a minute later a tray containing what looked deceptively like a glass of red wine appeared, hovering next to Melissa. She took the glass and offered it to Caitlin.

"Another one, Cait?"

"Don't mind if I do." Caitlin took it from her and drank it. Then promptly started coughing and spluttering. "Mel, what on earth is this? Cabernet Sauvignon's not meant to taste like that!"

"Sobriety Potion." said Melissa primly.

"What'd you give me that for?" snapped Caitlin. She looked around, blinking. "Damn. I'm sober. A whole evening's drinking wasted."

"Look on the bright side." Melissa consoled her. "You won't get completely wasted as fast, which means more drinking time for you. Won't that be nice?"

"Not as nice as blissful oblivion in the early hours of the morning. Mel, I'm capable of staying vertical for ages. I've even outdrunk Sirius Black before now, and that's no mean feat."

"Caitlin," Melissa's voice made it clear in no uncertain terms that there were far more important things than Caitlin Tyler's alcohol intake to talk about. "Luella here is trying to tell you something. Why don't the two of you adjourn to a side room for a bit?" She gave Caitlin a meaningful look. Caitlin took the hint.

"Oh, alright then. Come on, Luella. Tell me all about it." She led Luella off into the conservatory.

Luella shivered as the cold air hit her. While it was certainly secluded, and the view of the night sky and the bright lights of Chudley twinkling in the distance was not something Luella had any complaints about, the lack of insulation and central heating was less appealing. Fortunately, Caitlin was no longer protected from the cold by four glasses of wine and some of Leonard Lovegood's cocktails.

"*Ignito!*" A small fire roared into life next to the wicker sofa, evidently enchanted so as to give off plenty of heat and light, but not actually burn anything. Caitlin sat down next to it and motioned for Luella to sit beside her. "Alright then. What's so important?"

"How well do you know the Clearwaters?"

"Well enough. Why?"

Luella took a deep breath. "Because I think I might be related to them. I mean, Patrick said I looked just like his ex-wife, then I got talking to Penelope and she showed me a picture of her mother, and we worked out that her grandmother could be my great aunt. What do you think? Am I related to them? Well? Am I?" Luella could barely contain herself.

Caitlin just looked at her, and smiled. She didn't seem at all surprised. "Of course you are, dear. Did your parents never tell you about your mad old great aunt Arabella?"

"Well, yeah. I even met her a couple of times. But I always hated going round her house, so Mum and Dad stopped taking me. Never knew she was a witch though!"

"Nor do your parents. I'm surprised you didn't guess sooner though. Yes, Luella, you do indeed have mage relatives. Penelope Clearwater's your second cousin. Pleased?"

"I should say so!" Luella leant back, gazing up at the stars, trying to digest this news. "I mean, this makes everything different!" She met Caitlin's gaze again. "It means I'm not a genetic fluke after all. There's been mages in my family all along. I really am descended from Morgan Tal-y-Rhys, aren't I?"

"You're the Second Heir. Of course you are."

"I know. But..." Luella searched for the right words. "This makes it so much more real. This is the first time I've ever really been conscious of having a family history, you know? It's the first time I've ever really felt this whole Heir thing as something that's part of me. Before, I felt like it was something imposed on me from outside. I used to constantly wonder 'why me?' But now it's different. It's like it's part of my heritage, so why not me?"

"Why not indeed." Caitlin was studying Luella intently, something clearly on her mind. "But Luella, it would never have been forced on you in any case, don't you realise that? Don't think of yourself as a hapless pawn in all this - you're not! Morgan wouldn't have pointed a finger at you and intoned 'You shall be my Heir'. She would have approached you in the afterlife and offered you the job. She wouldn't have lied to you or blackmailed you, or anything, just explained what would be involved and

asked. You would have had a choice, Luella. And the right to refuse too. But you didn't exercise it. You agreed. For some insane reason, you actually wanted to do it."

"I did?" A pause. "Why?"

"Only you can say for sure, Luella. However, perhaps if you'd just had a life where you'd felt powerless, at the beck and call of other people, having to put their needs first and sacrifice your own dreams, maybe you'd jump at the chance for a life where you were the centre of attention for a change, where you got the power and the glory for once, where your needs were the most important thing for everyone. Maybe."

The words struck a chord. Luella felt an eerie chill of recognition go running up her spine as the words that had come to her earlier made their presence felt once more. "Maybe that's why you're a Slytherin this time around..."

"Caitlin," she began, "do we really reincarnate?"

"Of course we do, Luella. Well documented fact. It's really quite common for mage children to talk about past lives when they're young. They almost always forget later, of course, but nevertheless, it happens. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think I know who I might have been." Luella took a deep breath before launching into an explanation of her suspicions. The resemblance. The way she'd felt as if she'd known Patrick Clearwater before. The little voice that had whispered that maybe that was why she was now a Slytherin. And strangest of all, the vision she'd had looking into Patrick's eyes, the vision of being murdered by a Death Eater forcing her own husband to perform Avada Kedavra on her, and cursing her killer with her last words.

"I was her, wasn't I? I was Louise Figg."

Caitlin didn't reply. She just gazed at Luella with something like sadness in her eyes, mingled with amazement, presumably at having worked all that out.

"Well? Am I right?" Come on, say something, thought Luella. Tell me I'm not gonig mad...

"You may well be." Caitlin finally spoke. "That vision..." She shivered. "You just described her death pretty much perfectly. I didn't see it happen, she was already dead when I got there, but it tallies with what I was told later."

"You were there?" gasped Luella.

"I was. Got there in time to stop them killing Patrick and Penelope too." She met Luella's gaze, the memory evidently still tormenting her. "But not in time to save Louise. I'm sorry."

Luella realised with a start that Caitlin was actually apologising to her. Apologising for not getting there in time, for letting her die. The thought was unnerving, to say the least.

"Don't be." she said, reaching for Caitlin's hand. "It's not your fault. You couldn't be everywhere. Anyway, between you and me, I think you did her a favour. Apparently she was constantly picked on by her mum, who virtually intimidated her into being a housewife. I'd have hated it. I'm much happier being Luella the Slytherin."

Caitlin sighed happily, smiling with relief. "I'm so glad you said that. I mean, it's what I always thought, but I needed to hear it from you too. Maybe it really was for the best. After all, Penelope doesn't seem to have suffered too badly, and Patrick's dealt with it rather well considering."

"Poor thing. That must be awful, to come out from a curse and realise that you've just killed someone you love without even realising it. No wonder he doesn't like talking about it. Do you think I should tell him I don't blame him?"

"No!" said Caitlin firmly. "No, you should not. I don't want you saying a word of this to any of the Clearwaters. It would only upset them. Maybe one day, when the time is right. But not yet. Promise me, Luella!"

"Alright, alright. I won't say anything. But he just looked so upset when I asked..."

"Well of course he would." Caitlin said patiently. "It's still a sore point even now. Which is why you shouldn't go poking into it. When he is ready to tell you about it, if he is ready to tell you about it, he will do so. And until then, stay out of it!"

"Yes, Caitlin." Luella said, hanging her head in submission. Until something occurred to her. "Caitlin, do you know what happened to the Death Eater who did it? I mean, did the curse work at all?"

Caitlin laughed grimly. "I should say so! Louise Figg was a female-line descendant of Morgan, just like you are. She was a Tal-y-Rhys, and when Tal-y-Rhys witches make curses like that, they invariably happen. It took seven months, but his conscience did indeed return. He also found out just what it was like to see someone he cared about suffer at Voldemort's hands in the process. And you kept your word too. You found him again, except this time around he's going to help you get revenge on Voldemort as a way of making it up to you."

"He is?" Luella asked in confusion. "But I don't know any Death Eaters..." Her voice trailed off as she realised that wasn't strictly true. And the former Death Eater in question fitted Caitlin's description exactly. "Professor Snape? Killed Louise Figg?"

Caitlin nodded. "He did. He's the reason I escaped unscathed. I didn't know it was him, but he recognised me and called off his colleagues. You see, his conscience started reviving there and then."

"My god." Luella whispered. She recalled her vision, and the Death Eater's voice that had sounded so familiar. Of course. It was Snape. How could she not have recognised him? She'd heard him use that exact same tone of voice with the Weasley twins hundreds of times. And she knew he was an ex-Death Eater too. Although there was a world of difference between knowing that and actually seeing him in action. It chilled

her, seeing him being so cold, especially to her. After all, in this life, he'd almost always treated her well. To think that he'd ended her last one...

"Luella?" Caitlin's voice cut through her thoughts. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I mean, no, I mean... Are you sure?"

"Positive." Caitlin was watching her, worried. "Talk to me, Luella. You look horrified."

"Do I? Sorry. It's just so weird knowing that it was him who killed me." Luella shivered.

"I can imagine. Do you hate him?"

"No. No, I don't. But it's going to be weird seeing him again, knowing that. Very weird. I suppose you're going to tell me not to talk to him about it either, aren't you?" Luella sighed.

"However did you guess?" exclaimed Caitlin. "No, I really don't think it would be a good idea to tell him who you were either. But if you want to talk about it in the abstract, you know, just under the guise of telling him about your mage relatives or something, then feel free. I'm sure you're more than capable of getting him on to the subject without giving yourself away." she grinned knowingly.

"No problem." Luella replied, grateful for the tacit permission to broach the subject as long as Snape did not know she was the reincarnation of his victim. After all, she could hardly let this drop now. No wonder she'd been so deeply drawn to him. Her subconscious must have recognised him. However, it was rather disturbing that she was now attracted to the man who'd killed her, but to her former husband, she felt nothing more than mere liking. Still, she supposed that if she'd hated her home life before, it was only reasonable that she didn't want to get involved again.

Snape, on the other hand, she had every intention of cross-examining until he'd told her every single thought and feeling he'd had that night. One way or another, she had to know how he felt, if only to help her deal with the idea. And as soon as she got back to Hogwarts, she was going to find out.

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Chapter Fifteen The Slyth That Turned

All good things must come to an end, and Christmas is no exception. It didn't seem like long before the holidays were over and it was time for school once more.

Not that Luella minded. She'd done all her holiday homework, and it would be nice to be back with her friends again, in an environment where she didn't have to pretend she was normal all the time. Although her parents didn't condemn the idea of magic, Luella could tell that they weren't comfortable with it at all. Which meant she ended up living a rather schizophrenic existence at times, being an ordinary Muggle teenager while simultaneously being the Second Heir and possessor of powers most people could only dream of. No, all in all, Luella couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts, where in Deanna's words, she could get a proper education with her real people. Not for all the world would she be anywhere else now. Certainly not at that comprehensive in her town. To think she'd almost ended up going there.

However, to be fair, there were certain aspects of life at Hogwarts that she could live without. Draco Malfoy. Divination. Being the unsuspecting victim of yet another Weasley prank. Getting suckered into helping Marlie with her homework. And Quidditch.

It was unfortunate then, that Quidditch was the dominant topic of conversation in the Serpents' Nest that night. Quidditch, and the brand new racing brooms that Deanna had acquired from her mother, which the rest of her house were even now cooing over like they were the most amazing thing ever invented. Luella couldn't really see what all the fuss was about, although even she had to admit they did look very nice.

"Nice?" Deanna demanded. "Several thousand Galleons worth of brooms, and all you have to say is that they look nice?"

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Would you rather I said they looked horrible?"

"Don't be facetious. Lu, these are the brooms of champions. They're custom-made for us, they're very fast, they look stunning, they're very valuable and unavailable to anyone else until the summer. They are not nice! They are breathtakingly beautiful works of art!"

Luella inspected them again, just in case she'd missed anything the first time. She hadn't.

"They just look like brooms to me."

The entire house gasped as if she'd said the Mona Lisa was just splodges of paint on a canvas, or the collected works of Beethoven just someone hitting piano keys.

"What?!" screeched Marlie in horror. "Just brooms? Lu, you take that back right now!"

"Luella," Lucas Vetinari told her coldly, looking up from his brand new Firebolt for the first time since he'd got it. "these are not just brooms."

"No," sighed Mike Lovegood, peering over his sister's shoulder, eyes riveted to her Firebolt by sheer, unadulterated envy, "they're Firebolts. Sis, I don't suppose there's any chance...?" His voice trailed off hopefully.

"Forget it." Marlie's crisp tones dashed his hopes immediately. "This broom is customised for precisely my height, weight and build. If you rode it, you'd break it. And no you're not having your own. Reserve team members only."

Mike turned straight to Marcus Flint. "Flinty, there's no easy way to tell you this but..."

"Michael." came the equally uncompromising reply. "You are not handing in your notice and joining the reserves just to get a Firebolt. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Marcus." Mike muttered.

"Glad to hear it." Marcus turned to address the rest of the first team. "And that goes for the rest of you too!"

There were moans of disappointment, but no real complaints. After all, most of them didn't really want to be in the reserves that much.

The attention started to dissolve after that. Once the reserves had been issued with their Firebolts and everyone had had a chance to look at them, the conversation began drifting off towards other topics and the gathering broke up.

Marlie was still transfixed by her Firebolt. "Tyler, you have surpassed yourself this time! I knew they'd be good - a former member of one of the greatest Chaser line-ups Slytherin have ever had would hardly choose anything other than the best - but I had no idea they'd be this good! Deanna, I could kiss you. Your mother is a demi-goddess."

"Don't you start, she already thinks she's Aphrodite Incarnate. But she's certainly come through for us with these." Deanna caressed her Firebolt, gleefully anticipating riding to victory on it. "How can we lose with these? How can we possibly lose? The other teams don't have a chance! Hell, we could give the first team a run for their money on these!"

"Hey now, that's an idea." mused Marlie. "Wonder if Flinty's up for a friendly? I shall have to ask. But enough of this Quidditch talk!"

"Thank the gods." Luella and Rianne said in unison, before turning to each other and grinning. Marlie chose to ignore them.

"Tell me. What else has been happening at Hogwarts while I've been away? What have we missed?" She lowered her voice. "How's Ginny?"

"Much improved." Rianne told her. "Fred and George have decided they no longer have a problem with her being Slyth. In fact, they're rather proud of the fact." She proceeded to tell Marlie and Luella about the snake-in-the-box and the prank on

Malfoy. Both girls fell about laughing in all the right places, and the shrieks when Rianne described Draco's reaction to a paper snake lunging at him were probably audible right up in Gryffindor Tower.

"Perfect. Just perfect." Luella dried her eyes. "Oh man, I wish I'd seen it. Reckon he'll fall for it twice?"

"I doubt it." Rianne responded. "He's not Ron Weasley after all."

"Poor boy." Marlie giggled. "Never mind, I'm sure he's not too badly affected by it all."

"Poor boy, my arse. He deserved it all, Marls." Deanna was reminded suddenly of Draco's little slip-up not long after, when he'd called his cousin Marls. And now here was Marlie almost feeling sorry for him. Very intriguing indeed. However, she didn't get the chance to follow up her curiosity. Marlie had turned the conversation back towards Ginny.

"No doubt. Still, great idea of Fred and George's. I saw them buying it, and they as good as told me it was for Ginny. Nice to see that unlike some, they still think Ginny's a human being." A momentary flash of bitterness before the smile returned. "Ginny's happier then?"

"Oh yes." Deanna confirmed. "Now she's realised that not all her family either hate her or are deeply disappointed in her, you'd be surprised. She's not been depressed at all this holiday. Take a look for yourself."

Marlie turned to look at Ginny, who was even now sitting in a corner with Lydia and Autumn, laughing over some private joke and apparently not possessed of a care in the world. Satisfied, Marlie turned away.

"Ri, Deanna, you two are marvels. She doesn't seem like the same girl."

"Yes, she seemed to perk up on Christmas Day, and stayed that way ever since. It really was quite surprising how quickly it happened. Almost by magic." Rianne said, suddenly appearing very thoughtful.

"Or just good company. Amazing what companionship can accomplish." Deanna was regarding Ginny with a fondness normally reserved for her dorm mates only. "You know, she's a really sweet little kid now she's Slytherined up a bit. Do you know, I think she's finally come to terms with it?"

"Good for her." Marlie's usual levity slipped for the merest of instants, revealing a genuine affection. "Maybe now she'll stand up to Ron and tell him what a divot he's being."

"Divot?" Rianne whispered to Luella, not having heard the term before.

"A golfing term." Luella explained. "Refers to a useless clod of earth that does nothing other than get in the way and generally cause annoyance to all and sundry."

"That sounds about right. Hey, that reminds me." The mention of Ron had brought back memories of the other events of Christmas Day. "Do you know what the Terrible Trio have done now?" She proceeded to tell them about the Polyjuice Potion and the impersonation of Crabbe and Goyle.

Neither Marlie or Luella could believe their ears. "Polyjuice Potion? But that's really advanced magic! Where on earth did they find the recipe for that? Not to mention the ingredients!" Luella's outward disapproval masked a secret jealousy that she'd never thought of anything like that.

"I suspect that the ingredients were courtesy of our very own Professor Snape." Rianne observed. "And it's not impossible for students to gain access to the Restricted Section under false pretences as you two well know." She watched with satisfaction as the two girls squirmed under her gaze.

"Good prank though. Malfoy was suckered good and proper. Damn, I wish I'd thought of it! But there's still time..." Deanna's eyes wandered over to where Malfoy was sitting with Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy, deep in what seemed to be a very indepth conversation that could only involve plotting and mischief. She just hoped it wouldn't involve her.

"Cheeky little so and so's though." Marlie seemed less impressed. "Fancy infiltrating our common room like that! How dare they!"

"Going to get your own back are you?" asked Luella, a note of weariness in her voice. Great, another dubious scheme that she'd no doubt get roped into.

"Too right. If Harry and Ron can sneak in here, then I'm going to bloody well get inside Gryffindor Tower. Somehow."

"Well, leave me out of it if you do. You're on your own, Marls."

Marlie just shrugged. "OK then. I'm sure I'll manage. But I'm going to do it. Oh yes. I am." She stared into space with the air of a fanatic, as her friends exchanged looks of resignation. "I'll get into that common room if it's the last thing I do."

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Marlie was not the only Slytherin lusting after revenge. On the other side of the common room, Draco and friends were also nursing grudges. And unlike Marlie, they'd had the holidays to brood over it. Not even Crabbe and Goyle's new Firebolts had been enough to win them over. Crabbe had flung his down in the corner without giving it a second glance, despite little gasps of horror from Goyle and Draco.

"Crabbe, you can't treat a Firebolt like that!" Goyle protested. "Look at it, it's beautiful."

"It's Tyler's." Crabbe snarled. "I want nothing to do with anything she's had."

"Yeah, but... a Firebolt though!" Goyle hadn't let go of his since Deanna had placed it in his arms and was still stroking it tenderly.

"Crabbe, I know you're not exactly fond of Tyler, but all the same, I hope you're not going to be an idiot about this." Draco told him, with just a hint of sternness. "That is a top of the range broom you have there, and you treat it with respect. And it isn't Tyler's any more. It's yours. So look after it."

Crabbe laughed morosely. "If you think I'm riding it in the reserve matches, you've got another think coming. I'm not doing it! Honestly, it'll be as if I've surrendered. Riding her broom, playing in her team, on her side, doing as she tells me. Well, I'm not giving in, do you hear me? I'm not!"

"Crabbe." Draco's voice was not one to be argued with. "Shut up. And stop being such a prat. You are going to accept that broom. You are going to ride it in the reserve games. And you're *both* going to stop sabotaging the matches. Do you want to ever play first team Quidditch or not?"

Crabbe didn't answer. Draco continued in his frostiest tones. "Well, the best way of doing it is to do well in the reserves. So stop acting like a bloody Gryffindor, letting your emotions getting in the way of your ambitions, and sort your life out. Got it, Crabbe?"

"Yes, Malfoy." Crabbe muttered darkly.

"Good. What about you, Goyle?"

"No worries, boss." Goyle was still staring at his broom as if in a trance. "For a broom like this, I'll do whatever the hell Tyler and Lovegood want."

"Masochist." Pansy teased. Goyle blushed, his head sinking into his shoulders.

Crabbe, however, was still furious. "Goyle, you traitorous git. Forgotten already that she got your brother expelled too?"

"Well, no. But to be fair, he did deserve it." Goyle pointed out.

"That is not the point!" hissed Crabbe. "And since when have you been all virtuous and fair-minded?"

"Since Tyler gave me this Firebolt." Goyle returned his attention to the broom, its sleek design and glimmering surface all the answer that was required.

"Oh yeah? Well what about more recent history? Forgotten about that impersonation of hers? Don't want revenge for that?"

"We don't know it was her for certain." Draco reminded him. "Could have been anyone. Damn, this is frustrating!"

"I still say it was Tyler." Crabbe snarled. "She's exactly the kind of sneaky, backstabbing kid to do something like that. Bet she's been laughing about it all holidays. Her and Stormosi both."

"Don't be silly." snapped Pansy. "She was in the common room at the same time as the impostors. Couldn't have been her."

"Aren't there tales of mages who could appear in two places at once?" Crabbe was refusing to let the idea drop. "She could have mastered that. Or maybe she had accomplices to do the impostoring. Or, right, how about this, her and Stormosi did the impostoring and then got someone else to take their places." He noticed the other three staring at him, Draco and Pansy in outright scepticism, and even Goyle not entirely convinced. "Well, she might have done! She's a Tal-y-Rhys, who knows what they're capable of..."

"Crabbe." Draco's voice was the verbal equivalent of a landslide on the tracks of Crabbe's train of thought. "Not even the Tal-y-Rhys routinely teach their kids bilocation. And don't you think getting someone else to impersonate them is just a bit too risky?"

"They might still have had accomplices though." said Crabbe, stubborn to the last. "I bet it was their idea."

"Maybe. But then again maybe not." Pansy had an odd gleam in her eyes, as if an idea had come to her. "After all, it's not really Tyler's style, is it? She's the kind who likes to rub it in, isn't she? She wants full credit for her escapades. If it had been her, she'd've wanted to be there when you found out so she could enjoy the look on your faces. She prefers more public forms of humiliation."

"Like when she took on Lockhart." Goyle said in admiration. "Now that was a good evening. Man alive, I'd been wanting to give him a good going over for weeks." He noticed the look on Crabbe's face and shut up. Pansy, on the other hand, didn't seem to be bothered by it.

"Exactly, Goyle. I think we're looking at someone a little less sure of themselves here. Someone who's on more equal terms. Someone who doesn't go in for public humiliation but who's not averse to getting back at you three."

Crabbe and Goyle looked blank. Draco, however, was beginning to guess what she was getting at.

"Are we talking individuals in our year, by any chance?"

"We might be."

"Potter. I knew it!" Draco slammed his fist into his hand. "Son of a... Wait until I catch up with him. Him and Weasley, it must have been. With Granger masterminding the whole affair and brewing the Polyjuice Potion. Damn them!" Draco's skin had never exactly been dark, but none of them had ever seen him that

pale before. None of them had seen him literally trembling with rage before. Pansy backed away nervously and even Crabbe and Goyle were wary.

"Draco, calm down!" Pansy hoped she didn't sound as alarmed as she felt. "We'll find a way to get back at them."

"Too right we will!" snarled Draco. "No one does that to Draco Malfoy and gets away with it! Bastards! Just they wait... My god, I bet they're sitting up in the Gryffindor common room right now, which by the way is probably light, airy, decked out with antique furniture and refreshingly free of fibre-optics, laughing at us. Joking about how they fooled Draco Malfoy. Well, they're not going to get away with it! I'm going to get them back if it's the last thing I do!"

"Absolutely, boss." Goyle had learned from long experience that when Draco was in one of these moods, the best course of action was to humour him.

"We'll do all we can." Pansy promised, resting a hand on his arm to calm him.

"Too right, Malfoy. Just one tiny little point. How?"

Draco stopped in his tracks, his turn to be derailed now. "Eh?"

"I said, how are we going to do it?" Crabbe repeated.

Draco stared at him, dumbfounded. Another first. "Erm, well, ah... How are we going to do it, Pansy?"

"Typical, gets all fired up then expects me to do all the work." Pansy retorted. "And I bet I don't get the credit either. Well, let me think." She leaned back in her chair, considering the possibilities. An idea came sneaking into mind. "Say, Drakie, how about we kill two birds with one stone?"

Draco regarded her with curiosity. "Go on. What do you have in mind? And don't call me Drakie."

"Well darling, you know how we're already working on how to get at Tyler by proxy?" Pansy purred.

"Yes." Draco exchanged looks with Crabbe and Goyle, who were as fascinated as he was.

"Well, I was thinking, the same plan might work equally well on Potter."

Goyle stared in confusion. "I don't get it. How does screwing up Tyler's life upset Potter too?"

Crabbe, however, got it straight away. "Goyle, you prat. Think! You manage to get at them both by going for something that links them both."

Goyle appeared none the wiser. It was Draco who had to spell it out.

"Who is Tyler's best mate, Goyle?"

"Lovegood?" Goyle volunteered.

"No. The other one."

"Oh. Mudblood Martin."

"Exactly. Who is also a good friend of Potter and Granger. Now do you see what I'm getting at?"

The Knut finally dropped. "I get it! We go for Martin and that'll sort them both out! Crabbe'll be able to stop going on about how he hates Tyler, and we can all sort out Potter and his mates!"

"Well done, Goyle. And keep your voice down. We don't want everyone knowing."

"Doesn't really help us though." Crabbe interrupted. "We're no nearer to sorting out Martin yet."

"Not yet, no." said Pansy. If the fact worried her, she wasn't showing it. "But we will. We've already got some dirt on her. If we keep our eyes and ears open, more will follow, and if it doesn't, well, we can always fake it. Can't we?" The innocent twinkle in her eyes didn't fool them in the slightest.

Draco hugged her, eyes flashing in triumph. "Pansy, you excel yourself sometimes. Let's do it! You with us, boys?"

"Yeah!" After all, Goyle reflected, it was only Tyler who he had now decided to be loyal to.

"One less Mudblood is fine by me, especially if it's Tyler's mate. Count me in!" laughed Crabbe. The four Slytherins shook hands on the deal, all of them jubilant. If this came off, they'd never have to skulk around Deanna Tyler again...

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By contrast, Ginny was feeling far less jubilant. Over the holidays, with the comforting presence of Deanna and Rianne, she'd not had a care in the world. No more nightmares. No more blackouts. No more voices. It had been almost like the old days, when she'd not had to worry about the dark presence that inhabited her diary hanging over her.

The deceptively harmless little book was currently stashed at the bottom of her trunk, buried under the Lockhart books Harry had given her. After all, it wasn't as if she ever really used them much, and after listening to Rianne's opinions of him all Christmas, it didn't look like she was ever going to. It really was quite surprising how many words there actually were to insinuate that someone was suffering a deficiency in the talent department. Even Deanna had wondered out loud if perhaps Rianne wasn't letting Lockhart get to her a bit. Nevertheless, Ginny had to admit that Rianne did

have a point, and now she wondered if she'd ever be able to take him seriously again. She made a mental note to try not to snort derisively whenever her mother started singing his praises.

Buried under a heap of dust-covered Lockhart books then, with the added protection of them having been Harry Potter's gift, seemed to be the best place for the diary. Certainly it had since lost its influence over her. However, there was also the fact that she'd not actually slept in her dorm since Christmas, having virtually moved in to Deanna and Rianne's dorm over the holidays. The two fourth years exuded an aura of fierce self-confidence that seemed to stop any trouble dead in its tracks, and Ginny couldn't help responding to it in kind, revelling in it as it released her own latent bravery. You could never stay frightened for long in their presence.

Unfortunately, the end of the holidays had brought that particular protection to an end. Deanna and Rianne were now back in their usual gang with Marlie and Luella, and Ginny was back with Lydia and Autumn, who while friendly enough, didn't have that aura of invulnerability that the older Slytherins possessed.

Walking back into her dorm that night, she was made painfully aware of it almost at once. The wave of fury caught her as soon as she walked in, gripping her intestines with a chill grip that stopped her in her tracks and threatened to bring her to her knees.

"What's the matter, Gin?" Autumn asked, noticing her discomfort.

"Nothing." Ginny forced a smile, no mean feat when a wall of pure rage was hemming her in from all sides. "I'm fine."

"You don't look it. Come on, come and sit down." Autumn led her over to her bed, oblivious to the hostility in the air. Ginny forced herself to follow her, almost having to push her way over to the bed. She gritted her teeth as the spirit of the diary howled and shrieked its malice at her, every step a battle for her sanity as her mind threatened to snap under the strain of the fear within. Somehow she made it, collapsing on the bed.

Autumn was staring at her in fright. "Gin, are you OK? You look absolutely terrified."

"My trunk..." Ginny whispered. "Move my trunk to the far corner." All the while, she could hear Tom howling at her, cursing her and all her family. How, how could Autumn not hear it? Ginny could barely hear anything else.

Autumn looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "You what?"

"Move it away from me. As far as possible. Please, Autumn." Ginny pleaded. It took all her strength to get the words out. How, she thought, how am I going to manage to last the night like this? What about the rest of the term? She didn't have to be a psychologist to know that her sanity wouldn't withstand many more onslaughts like this.

Autumn looked extremely dubious, but nevertheless produced her wand. A few charms later, and the trunk was banished to the far side of the dorm. The hatred eased

almost immediately. Slowly, Ginny began to relax a little, the trembling subsiding. She looked down and realised she was covered in sweat.

"Ginny, what on earth was going on there?" Autumn's voice cut through Ginny's train of thought, bringing her straight back to consciousness. "And don't tell me nothing. That was the most major of major freak outs I've ever seen."

Ginny shook her head. "It was nothing. Just me overreacting. I found a dead rat in my trunk over the holidays, and I really hate rats anyway. I just had this horrible thought that there might be another one in there and lost it."

Autumn looked sceptical, but did not question her further. Instead, she got up and walked over to the trunk, kicking it open and giving it a brief search.

"Nothing there, Gin. Just your clothes and books. You're safe."

"Thanks, Autumn." Ginny's relief was genuine, but it was down to the fact that Autumn had believed her more than anything else. "Sorry I worried you."

"Thank you. Will you try not to do it again? Before you start passing your phobias on to me." Checking her own things to make sure there were no rats there, Autumn turned in.

Ginny remained awake for a long time after that. Just because the diary was further away from her didn't mean she couldn't still feel it, although she could deal with it a lot better from that distance. I cannot take much more of this, she thought. Sooner or later, she'd either snap and give in to it once more, or go mad. Neither option was appealing. It seemed her only other choice was to get rid of the diary entirely. But how? Burying it would attract too much attention, and besides, where would she get a spade? There weren't any cliffs she could throw it off, she didn't know how to exorcise demons, and she suspected that burning it would have some rather unpleasant side-effects. Most dark tomes were specifically enchanted to make sure that anyone trying that got more than they bargained for, and Ginny had no intention of taking the risk. Which just left water. Every mage child knew that no magic could last in running water. However, there weren't any rivers, or even a mountain stream anywhere near the school. The nearest river was the River Hogg which flowed through Hogsmeade. It would have done, but first years weren't allowed off the school grounds, and she didn't want to attract attention by asking an older student to drop it in there for her. And the only other significant body of water was the lake. The lake...

Of course! Wasn't it a well-known tradition that the lake was bottomless? At the very least, there were said to be all sorts of underwater channels that came out in the oddest of places. If she could drop it in the lake somehow, all her problems would be solved. But how to make sure it ended up in the lake's very depths without anyone seeing her do it?

Well, the answer to that was obvious. It was well known that the toilets all emptied out into the lake. If she flushed it down one of the toilets, it'd get swept out into the lake straight away and she need never see it again. Problem solved! She had no idea it was that easy. The only thing left to do was to pick a relatively isolated set of toilets

so she'd have some privacy, and the whole thing would soon be a distant nightmare. Turning over, she settled down to sleep, feeling a lot better than she had done in weeks. Rage all you like Tom, she thought, by this time tomorrow you'll be out of my life for good!

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Easier said than done. Tom Riddle had other ideas, and wasn't giving up without a fight. The diary clutched against her chest, Ginny struggled against the invisible wall of hate that pushed her back, trying to shut out Tom's oh-so-seductive blandishments.

You won't get rid of me that easily, Ginny.

Shut up! Ginny thought. I've listened to your lies for far too long! And now I'm doing what I should have done a long time ago - sending you right back to wherever you came from!

Brave, aren't we? You're sounding almost like a Gryffindor there. But you're not one really, are you?

Shut up. Shut up now! Ginny gritted her teeth and steeled herself against him. She was determined not to let him get to her.

We all know what you really are, Ginny Weasley. Slytherin through and through. Just a little Slytherin weasel.

I'm not listening to you! I'm not!

Ginny the Slytherin Weasley. Ginny the Slyth. No good fighting it. No good trying to be brave and virtuous. Not any more. That's for Gryffindors, like that nice Harry Potter and that brother of yours, Ron isn't it?

Don't you even dare mention them! Just stay away from them!

I would if you could. But you can't, can you? Can't stop thinking about them, can you? Can't stop remembering everything your brother's said, can't get rid of the niggling suspicion that maybe, just maybe, he might be right.

That brought Ginny to a halt. Why, oh why, had she confided so many of her secrets to him? He knew all her weaknesses, all her vulnerabilities. All the sore spots that could bring her to her knees in a flash.

Ah yes, that's hit a nerve hasn't it? The possibility that maybe Ron's right about Slytherins, and they are all inherently evil beyond redemption. Well, maybe so. Maybe they are. And if that's so, why fight it? Never forget who laid down the moral codes we all still blindly follow. Gryffindors, Ginny, Gryffindors and their Hufflepuff allies. The winners always make the rules. But if your power lies in opposition to those rules, why follow them? If your nature is antithetical to them, then why sacrifice yourself? Come, Ginny. Join me. I can give you power, power beyond your wildest dreams. You

need never be frightened again. It's your destiny, Ginny, your destiny as a Slytherin, the destiny that ultimately awaits all Slytherins.

All of us?

All of us. Every single one, except of course those too weak or too fearful to embrace it.

It was as if he'd read her mind. Because her question had been inspired by the memory of Deanna Tyler and Rianne Stormosi, and the quiet strength they exuded. Weakness and fear were the last qualities she associated with them. And yet they were both also very, very Slytherin. Then there was Marlie, also the Slytherin's Slytherin, yet as fearless as any Gryffindor, although perhaps shameless was a more accurate way of putting it. And finally Luella Martin, superficially more of a Ravenclaw than a Slytherin, and yet she possessed this undeniable power, a certain attitude that despite, or maybe because of, the surface lovability, you did not cross her lightly. Just because she wasn't obviously plotting something didn't mean she would tolerate interference. With Luella, the impression was of someone who would never dream of betraying you or hurting you, but who also had some very firm goals of her own and a strong sense of her territory and woe betide anyone who transgressed either. Four Slytherins, each different, and yet each true to their house. None lacking in strength of one sort or another. And none even remotely tempted by the dark side.

"You're wrong!" Ginny whispered, knowing suddenly, feeling it in her very bones, that Slytherin did not necessarily mean dark side. That there was a whole seam of Slytherin power lying untapped that could be used for good not just evil. And that the time was right to bring it back into the light once more. "You are so, so wrong!"

For some reason, she imagined Luella again. Luella, kindhearted, friendly. Luella, steely blue eyes and the hint of power lurking beneath. And with that image, a definite reaction from Tom. A violent reaction, but not of hate. At least, not just of hate. One of fear too. Could it be she'd found his weak spot?

She increased the imagery, putting all her willpower into it, making it more aggressive. And now it was not sweet and charming Luella, but cold and ferocious Luella, cloak and hair flying out behind her, eyes blazing, righteous anger driving all before her. The phrase Wrath of God could have been invented to describe her, except it would be Wrath of Goddess in her case, but still.

Get back. Get back now! Tom hissed, but she could tell his authority was crumbling. It was more of a plea than a command.

Ginny began to smile. She was right. He was afraid of her! Tom Riddle afraid of Luella Martin. Who would have thought it? She intensified it even more. And unbidden, saw another image come to mind, that of two snakes entwined around some kind of pole, the same image she'd seen tattooed on Luella's arm in her last nightmare. At the mere sight of it, Tom's composure cracked entirely as his voice dissolved into incoherent screams.

Slowly but surely, Ginny felt the hate begin to give. She opened her eyes and walked on, finding it becoming progressively easier as her will became her own again. As she reached the first floor toilets, the least used girls' toilets in the school, she was almost dancing with joy, Tom's influence over her broken and triumph singing in her veins.

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At that very moment, Luella, eating her breakfast in the Great Hall without a care in the world, felt her Mark start to glow. And with it, her power start to rise and flow out of her, as if in preparation for an attack.

She looked around her. Nothing out of the ordinary. And yet... Someone, somewhere, was using her power, calling on it for help. Needing her assistance. Needing her to help fight... In a flash, she sensed it. The presence of the one individual who she and only she could combat. Her adversary, predestined before her birth. The First Heir, Salazar's Heir. Voldemort.

But only for a second. It wasn't the same presence she'd felt last year, not the same all-encompassing threat. Just a flicker of it, just a shadow of its former self. In fact, it didn't seem to be really here at all. As if Voldemort himself wasn't here, but his influence was. Someone was using his power to carry out the attacks and get into the Chamber, but Voldemort himself wasn't here, might not even be aware of it. How very interesting. And now someone else was calling on her to help fight it, prevent another attack even. Well, how could she refuse?

Concentrating hard, she let the power build up before sending it out, a torrent of divine fury that none would surely be able to resist.

It seemed to work. Within minutes, she felt the presence die away, beaten back, at least for now. Who knows, there might not even be any more attacks now, although Luella wasn't going to start celebrating too soon. However, she was satisfied that there certainly wouldn't be any for the foreseeable future.

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Ginny, of course, didn't know that. All she knew was that she'd finally found a weapon that worked, and that Tom Riddle could never hurt her again. Flinging open a cubicle door, exulting in the sense of victory, she dropped the diary into the toilet bowl and pulled the flush with a triumphant flourish.

"Take that, Tom!" she laughed as he screamed in helpless rage. She could only watch in jubilation as the book disappeared finally, carried away by the running water that no magic could penetrate. And as it did so, its hold over her broke. The last vestiges of fear melted away, and Ginny stood up, shaking herself free, happier than she'd felt for a long time. Free of that particular burden, she walked swiftly away, confident that nothing could surely hurt her now.

Of course, had Ginny seen what had happened after she'd left, she wouldn't have been nearly so sanguine. The torrent of water carried the book down to the lake alright, but once it was in the still water, its power began to return. Gathering its strength, the

book built up enough power to give it momentum, enchanted the lake waters so that they would follow and direct it, then let go, propelling itself back up the now quiet water pipe, back out of the toilet and into the school, flying across the room, hitting the far wall and rebounding onto the floor, followed by a jet of water that flooded not only the toilets but the corridor outside, much to the annoyance of Filch who had to clear it up. However, preoccupied as he was with the corridor, he missed the diary entirely. It was someone else who found that.

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For now though, Ginny believed her troubles to be over. Nothing could hurt her now. Nothing. She took the steps two at a time, making her way to the Great Hall for whatever was left of breakfast.

And ran straight into Ron and Harry.

"Oh!" she gasped, taking a few seconds to register who it was that she'd just collided with. Once she'd realised, the Slytherin composure was up in an instant.

"Ron."

"Ginny." The two of them stared at each other, neither knowing what to say. Harry watched from a distance, deciding that it was best to let them sort it out themselves.

"Are you going to let me past? Only I'm rather hungry and if I don't get to breakfast soon, Deanna and Goyle will have had all the best bits." True enough - those two could eat even Hogwarts out of food given the chance.

Ron just nodded mutely, stepping out of the way to let her by. Ginny walked on, rather glad that was over with. Until Ron called her back.

"Ginny."

She turned. "Yes?"

He struggled to find the words, as if he was being eaten up from within. Finally he blurted it out.

"Are you happy? In Slytherin, I mean."

Ginny blinked. What an odd question. She hadn't thought Ron would give a damn about her feelings. She thought about it for a while. Once upon a time, the answer to that would have been obvious. Three months ago, the answer would have been no, of course not, I miss you all, I'm scared, everyone else thinks I'm a freak, and I'd give anything to be a Gryffindor like you. But now? Now she knew that if she said that, she would be lying. Because the truth was, she wasn't unhappy anymore. Not since Fred and George had given her that snake-in-the-box as a token of acceptance. She was Slytherin. It was her nature. And if Ron didn't like it, tough. He'd just have to deal with it. It wasn't her problem if he couldn't handle it. In fact, she was getting just a little tired of all the pettiness and immaturity.

"Yes. Yes, I'm happy." She drew herself up to her full height, suddenly feeling proud. Very proud. So this was that Slytherin Pride thing that Deanna and Rianne had told her about. She began to see why they'd spoken so highly of it. "Why wouldn't I be? It's a great house."

Ron stared at her. Then the shock wore off. "You what? Great? Slytherin? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing, Ron. Nothing. In fact, I feel healthier now than I've ever done." She stared him down, the sadness and hurt she'd felt when he'd turned against her finally giving way. "Why the hell would I want to be in Gryffindor, Ron? Just tell me that! What kind of life would I have in Gryffindor? Just an ordinary little kid, a good girl, doing what she's told, doing what everyone expects of her. Yet another Weasley, just Percy, Fred, George and Ron's little sister. Do you have any idea how boring that sounds? Do you? Being bracketed with the rest of you, being judged like the rest of you, never being seen as an individual in my own right, but just another Weasley? I would have been dismissed from the start, and never even thought about doing something in my own right. It wasn't until I broke the mould and got put in Slytherin that people started looking at me, really looking at me, and seeing Ginny instead of the youngest Weasley. It wasn't until I ended up in Slytherin that *I* started seeing myself as something more than the youngest Weasley. Do you understand me, Ron? Getting put in Slytherin isn't the horrible fate you seem to think it is. In fact, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. It isn't a curse. Being in Slytherin has set me free!"

Ron looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Doesn't your family mean anything to you at all?" he yelled at her.

"Of course it does, Ron." Here Ginny narrowed her eyes, ready for the killer line. "I love my family. I would never turn against any of them for being true to themselves. As long as they're not treading on my shoes, I don't mind what they do." She was gratified to see a twinge of guilt in Ron's eyes as her words hit the mark. "But I see no reason to let them stop me from being who I am. And if anyone has a problem with that, well then I'm not sure I want to be related to them anyway. Got that, 'brother'?" She spat the last word at him.

Ron winced. He reached out to touch her arm. "Ginny, wait a second." Ginny brushed him away.

"Get back." It really was absurdly simple, this icy dignity thing. So this was how Rianne managed it. For a moment, she idly wondered what hidden rage Rianne harboured to be so amazingly good at it, but pushed it away. She had more important things to think about. Like teaching Ron a lesson about declaring vendettas against Slytherins. "Listen very carefully Ron. I don't intend to repeat myself. I refuse to let you bully me into feeling guilty about something I didn't have any control over. I'm a Slytherin. I can't change that and I don't really want to. So you'd better learn to accept it, because there's nothing else you can do. Because I am happy as a Slytherin, I like being a Slytherin, and I am *not* going to let your bitterness and immaturity make me feel bad about it. If you can't handle it, then that's your problem and not mine. You don't want me as a sister? OK, fine. The way you're acting, I don't particularly want

you as a brother either. Now if you'll excuse me..." She turned on her heel and flounced into breakfast, head held high, leaving a dumbstruck Ron behind her.

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There was something different about the atmosphere in the Great Hall, she noticed. Something not quite right.

And then she realised what it was. The Hall was silent. With a dawning feeling of horror, she realised that every word of her argument with Ron must have carried in. After all she hadn't bothered keeping her voice down.

A noise started on the Slytherin table. The sound of... applause? Surely not? And yet it was. Marlie Lovegood had got to her feet and started clapping, and one by one, everyone else had followed suit. Soon the entire table was on its feet, cheering and chanting her name. Then Deanna Tyler leaping over the table and running towards her, sweeping her in a hug.

"Ginny, that was unbelievable!" the fourth year yelled. "You go, girl! Man alive, that rocked!"

"Too right it did!" she heard Rianne Stormosi saying. "About time someone put Ron Weasley in his place."

Deanna let her go, and Ginny found herself mobbed by Autumn and Lydia.

"Gin, that was awesome!" Autumn squealed.

"Brilliant." Lydia agreed. "Absolutely brilliant. Autumn and I have been saying for ages how the way Ron's been treating you is a disgrace. About time you stood up to him! Good on you!"

"Very good on you." came a boy's voice. Ginny turned to find herself staring into Draco Malfoy's eyes. However, there was no malice in them. Quite the reverse. He actually seemed rather proud of her. "Thank the gods someone finally stood up for us. Ginny Weasley, can I shake you by the hand?"

Ginny briefly debated the wisdom of doing this. On the one hand she'd been repeatedly told that Malfoy was trouble. But on the other hand, right now he didn't seem a threat. And just think what Ron's reaction would be...

"Alright then." She extended her hand. He shook it warmly before patting her on the shoulder.

"Well done, Ginny Weasley. Oh and welcome to Slytherin, by the way." He let her go and stepped back, still grinning at her. Crabbe and Goyle were next on the scene, also wanting to shake her hand. She obliged. Ron really wasn't going to like this at all, was he?

Finally, she was able to make it to the actual table, where Marlie was waiting, smiling proudly.

"I told him, Marls!" Ginny whispered. "I told him exactly what I thought of him!"

"Yes, you did, didn't you?" Marlie extended a hand and drew Ginny forward, propelling her into a seat and presenting her with a basket of croissants. "Well done, Gin. I'd say you put him in his place good and proper there."

"Thanks Marls." Ginny smiled, overwhelmed by all the attention. "For everything, you know? For helping me settle in. Looking after me. Talking Deanna and Rianne into keeping me company over Christmas. Telling Fred and George to sort themselves out or else. Thanks."

Marlie waved dismissively. "Think nothing of it, Gin. No one treats a fellow Slytherin like that and gets away with it. It was the least I could do. Besides, the twins decided to get reconciled with you on their own. And these two volunteered entirely of their own free will."

"And good fun it was too." Deanna grinned. "I'd do it all again if I could, eh Rianne?"

"Absolutely, teaching young Slytherins the ways of our house never fails to be rewarding. Especially when they learn as fast as our Ginny."

"Stop it Rianne, you're embarrassing the poor girl!" laughed Marlie as Ginny turned away, blushing. Trying to avoid everyone else's gaze, Ginny looked away and came face to face with Luella, who hadn't said anything yet.

They looked into each other's eyes. And Ginny knew in that instant that when she'd invoked Luella that morning against Tom, it hadn't been just her imagination at work. She really had had outside help, and what was more Luella knew it.

"Thank you too." Ginny whispered timidly. Luella might be a nice girl, but she was still a Slytherin, and Ginny knew far better than to think she was harmless.

"No problem." Luella for her part was observing Ginny extremely carefully. However, she didn't make any comment. "How are you feeling now, Ginny? Better?"

Ginny nodded. "Heaps. Thank you!" She looked at Luella, suddenly bursting with questions concerning just how an ordinary fourteen year old Muggle-born could frighten someone as dangerous as Tom and drive him back. But she didn't ask them.

"You're special, aren't you? Different. You could fight off the Heir, couldn't you?"

For the briefest of moments, Ginny thought she saw something flicker in Luella's eyes. But it was soon gone, to be replaced by a charming smile and a dazzling radiance that made Ginny forget all about asking any more questions.

"Maybe." laughed Luella. "But I'd rather not take any chances. Let's not talk about that though. Gin, your brothers seem to want a word with you."

Sure enough, Fred and George were elbowing their way through the crowd, eager to be the next in line to heap admiration on their little sister.

"Gin!" Fred yelled at her, sweeping her into a hug. "That was fantastic! Well done, mate! About time you stood up to him. Getting yelled at is the only language that boy understands."

"Although given that he seems to spend half his life getting Howlers from Mum, it's not really surprising that it's the only tongue he's fluent in. But that's beside the point. Well done, Ginny!" George shook her hand repeatedly before giving her a hug and ruffling her hair in that infuriating way that brothers seem to think is amusing.

"George!" Ginny protested, rearranging her hair.

"Sorry, sis." George smirked at her.

"You will be." Ginny responded tartly. A thought occurred to her. "Don't suppose either of you two know where Ron went, do you?"

"He seems to be keeping something of a low profile at the moment, oddly enough. Slinking off with his tail between his legs." Fred told her.

"Harry was busy telling him he'd brought it on himself and he could hardly expect you to sit back and take it forever, could he?" George added. He leaned forward, as if to impart some deadly secret. "Between you and me," he hissed in a stage whisper, "I think Harry rather likes you."

Ginny immediately blushed and squirmed as her housemates started laughing. "He does not!" She shot her brothers a glance. "Does he?"

"Ooh! Ginny fancies Harry, Ginny fancies Harry!" The twins started chanting and dancing around her.

Ginny went from scarlet to vermilion. "Cut it out! I do not fancy Harry Potter!"

"Much." Lydia added, diving out of the way before Ginny could get at her.

Ginny got to her feet, mustering her dignity. "I think that it is high time this discussion came to an end. Now I have to see Professor Snape about an essay. If you'll excuse me..." She headed for the door.

Fred turned to George, rubbing his eyes. "Did she just say she actually wants to see Snape outside of lessons? And on a Saturday too?"

George patted his brother's arm, leading him back to the Gryffindor table. "She's a Slytherin, Fred. You have to remember that they actually like him."

"Freaks. Mind you, I don't suppose it hurts what with all the points he gives them." He turned to his brother, inspired. "Say George, if we put a sign over the door to Snape's

classroom reading 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here', do you reckon he'd kill us?"

"Probably. That's if he caught us anyway."

"We'd have to get DT and Marls to lend us their brooms so we could make a quick getaway."

"Or we could just use Ginny as a human shield."

"George! That's cruel. We'll use Percy instead. Or better, Ron."

"Fred, the whole point of having a human shield is that it has to be someone Snape won't want to hurt."

"You're not making this easy for us, are you George?"

Ginny chuckled to herself as she left them to it. Typical Fred and George, always up to something. She just hoped it didn't get traced back to them, although she had her doubts. Snape was notorious for being able to accurately trace suspects, and even when he had no evidence whatsoever to go on, he had a nasty habit of guessing. He might be her House Head, but Ginny was very glad she'd never been on the wrong side of him.

Which is why she nearly jumped out of her skin with fright when she realised she was being followed. Particularly when she turned round and saw who it was. Professor Snape.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Weasley." he said, noticing her discomfiture with a wry grin. "I'm not trying to catch you out."

"Thank you, sir." she stammered. For all her fondness for Potions lessons, being this close to Professor Snape in the flesh was still a little unnerving.

"No need to thank me. In fact, I believe I should be thanking you. Your little defence of Slytherin this morning has worked wonders for our House's reputation. It was not just Slytherins applauding you, you know. I saw Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs cheering too. Even the Gryffindors seemed to agree with you on some points. Your brothers certainly seemed happy enough."

"Well, Fred and George are like that. They've always thought Ron was overreacting. And they're right." Ginny was surprised by her own vehemence. Snape seemed a little surprised, although not displeased.

"For once I agree with them. Your brother's treatment of you has been nothing less than shameful. Miss Tyler has told me a little of what went on, although she also said not to approach you directly as she thought it might embarrass you. However, rest assured I have been watching the situation carefully."

"Oh! You knew? I mean, Deanna told you?"

"Oh yes. Apparently she had a crisis meeting with her room mates the very first night of term and they immediately developed a plan to protect you and help you settle in. I am gratified to see that it worked."

"It did." Ginny nodded. She looked at him, her curiosity piqued. "Is that why you've been so nice to me? Because Deanna asked you to?"

"Partly. But I was already taking an interest. You said it yourself this morning. Had you been a Gryffindor, you would have been just another Weasley. But as a Slytherin, you attracted the attention of the entire school in your own right without even trying. Myself included. As a Gryffindor, I wouldn't have looked twice at you. Now you can congratulate yourself on being the first Weasley I've ever actually liked."

Ginny was speechless. Praise indeed. She never thought she'd see the day when Snape actually admitted to liking a Weasley. Fred and George would never believe their ears.

"Thank you!" she whispered. She found herself smiling suddenly. "It's true, isn't it? I'd have been nothing in any other house, would I?"

"Only you can answer that, Miss Weasley." However, the teacherly impartiality did not appear to go much more than skin-deep.

Ginny paid no attention, lost in her own train of thought. "You know, that's why the Hat put me here. I was so sick of being looked down on and being dismissed as only a Weasley, that I told the Hat to put me somewhere I could be seen in my own right and be special. Somewhere I could shine. And it made me a Slytherin."

"It did. Do you regret it?" The usual cool disinterest had disappeared. He was watching her intently. However, she was not frightened any more. Quite the reverse.

"Not in the slightest! I love it!"

"I'm very glad to hear it. Although it didn't seem that way the night of the Sorting."

"It wasn't." Ginny looked back in wonder at how she'd felt then. She couldn't even remember it clearly, much less comprehend the sea of emotions she'd been set adrift on that night. "All I remember is walking over to the Slytherin table in shock and getting cuddled by Marlie."

"And now look at you." Snape was regarding her with an emotion she'd never seen on him before, and which was not unpleasant to behold. Pride. "Every inch the Slytherin. Hard to believe you're the same girl. Certainly when your brother was around you never walked like that. Always you walked like a victim, as if afraid he'd turn on you. Don't think no one noticed. We all did. Had you not been brother and sister, Professor McGonagall and I would have intervened, but as it was, the Headmaster seemed to think it was better if we let you sort it out yourselves. I did have my doubts, but it seems to have paid off. I don't know what Miss Tyler and her friends did, but whatever it was, it worked. You are truly a Slytherin now. Take twenty points."

"Twenty?? Are you serious?" She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Fred and George were going to hit the roof when they heard about this.

"Perfectly serious. It's always nice to see a previously downtrodden Slytherin start realising their power. Last year it was Luella Martin, and it didn't feel at all bad seeing that either."

Ginny recalled Luella's image driving Tom Riddle away, and the sense that Luella Martin was a lot more powerful than she looked.

"Sir," she asked tentatively, "what happened to Luella? I mean, she's just a kid and yet there's something about her..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape didn't answer immediately. When he did, his voice was quiet and far away, as if it was something he didn't want to speak of.

"In the fullness of time, you will know everything. But until then, I rather think it's Miss Martin's business and hers alone. You will have to ask her. In fact, you can do so right now. Here she is."

Ginny turned, and blushed when she saw Luella strolling down the corridor towards them, at ease and confident. She rather hoped the older Slytherin hadn't heard her ask Snape that particular question. If you were so reckless as to pry into a Slytherin's secrets, the last thing you wanted was for them to find out.

She needn't have worried. Luella sauntered up as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Morning, Gin. Morning, Professor. Hey sir, were you at breakfast this morning? Did you hear Ginny having a go at Ron? Wasn't it great?"

"It was certainly entertaining. I was just congratulating Miss Weasley on her performance. Worthy of a true Slytherin."

"I got given twenty points." Ginny told her proudly.

"Nice one!" Luella seemed impressed. "Is it really that easy? I'd better go track Ron down, if all I have to do to get twenty points is have a go at him."

"Miss Martin, it is not that easy, as you yourself well know from last year."

Here a shadow crossed over Luella's face. "No. No, it wasn't." She shuddered, an involuntary gesture that sent a reciprocal stab of fear through Ginny as well. Fear accompanied by a memory of Tom Riddle's venomous red eyes...

She brushed the memory away. Riddle was gone, gone for good. She was a true Slytherin now, and nothing could hurt her. She looked up and found herself looking straight into Luella's eyes. And suddenly felt the urge to head off to the library and do some study. Unaware that the impulse came from anywhere but her own mind, she gathered her things and prepared to leave.

"I've just realised, I've got a whole heap of homework to do. No good getting twenty points for Slytherin if I go and lose them all by not handing homework in on time, is it?"

"Very true, Miss Weasley. If only the rest of my students were so assiduous in their studies." Snape sighed, with an air of melancholy that said all too clearly that he had very little hope of it ever happening. "Never mind, sir." Ginny said cheerily. "At least you've got me and Lu to keep your faith in humanity alive. See you both." And with that, she was gone.

Luella waited until Ginny had turned the corner before addressing Snape with an urgency she'd kept well hidden up until that point.

"Sir, I need to talk to you. It's important."

Snape's good mood evaporated, although he was self-possessed enough to conceal any anxiety he might be feeling.

"Alright. We'll go to my office. Come."

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It was with mixed feelings that Severus showed Luella into his office. On the one hand, Luella didn't seem frightened, so that was one thing off his mind. On the other, Luella demanding to talk to him with such urgency did not bode well.

"So. What's so important that you had to use Glamoury to get rid of Miss Weasley so quickly? And don't deny it. I can tell when you're using it even if she can't."

If Luella felt guilty, she didn't show it.

"Hey, I had to. I could hardly talk about the girl while she was right in front of me, could I?"

This got his attention. Of all the topics he'd imagined Luella wanting to talk to him about, he hadn't thought Ginny Weasley would be one of them.

"What about Miss Weasley?"

"I think she might have been attacked this morning. Or threatened with it."

"Attacked?" Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing. "But she's absolutely fine, how could she have been?"

"I don't know." Luella replied, troubled. "But this morning, I felt the Mark glowing, and power going out of me. And I felt him. Voldemort."

"What?!" And there he'd been, thinking things couldn't have got any stranger. "Voldemort? Luella, are you alright?" The effort of fighting Voldemort last year had nearly killed her. He had no wish to go through all that again.

"I'm fine." Luella reassured him with a smile that told him she guessed what he was thinking. "It wasn't like last year. It was more like some kind of echo of him, as if he's left some part of himself here and it was that I was picking up on."

"Someone's using his power, but he himself is not here?" Severus was beginning to have an extremely bad feeling about this. The famous Snape intuition that had resulted in so many students who thought they'd covered their tracks perfectly getting caught out was now hammering at the back of his brain, insisting that there was something he ought to remember, something important. But it was tantalisingly out of his reach.

"That's it." Luella nodded. "That's it exactly! I couldn't tell who it was though."

"Unfortunate." Severus was surprised at how well he'd concealed his frustration. "But what does Miss Weasley have to do with this?"

"I think it might have been her using my power, in fact I'm sure of it. Especially when I saw her in the Great Hall. Granted, it could have just been the flush of victory, but there was something more there. She had this aura of power around her which just seemed a bit too similar to Glamoury for my liking. I don't know for sure, but I just have this feeling that it was her who called on me. That someone tried to attack her and she thought of me and, well, she was able to use my power to fight them off. That's my theory anyhow." Luella sat back, awaiting his opinion.

"Interesting. Very interesting." It did make sense. And it certainly explained why Ginny wanted to know why Luella was special all of a sudden. But on the other hand, there was something about it that didn't quite ring true. "But why was Ginny able to fend off an attack when the other victims couldn't?"

"Because Ginny knows me. Maybe she had an intuition that I was more than I seemed beforehand. After all, she lives in the same common room I do, she hangs around with Slytherins, she spent the holidays with Deanna and Rianne. She's had a lot more opportunity than the others to find out about me. OK, so she doesn't know the truth, but most Slytherins will tell you that I'm not to be messed with. Ginny must have picked up on that."

"Maybe." mused Severus. "But why, when faced with attack, did she think of you? She probably wouldn't have had time to do much. Why was your image the first thing that sprang to mind? She's closer to Deanna and Miss Lovegood, isn't she?"

"Maybe she thought of all of us. Then found that thinking of me in particular helped fight off her attacker."

Severus still wasn't convinced. "There's just a few too many maybes there for my liking. We need to talk to Miss Weasley, find out what really happened before we can know for sure. Can you do that, Luella? She'll probably respond better to you than to me, and besides you have Glamoury to help you along."

"I'll give it my best shot." Luella promised.

"Excellent. Now, was there anything else you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Actually there was." A very strange look indeed materialised on Luella's face, a look of intense curiosity backed up with a disturbing element of hunger. "Professor, did you ever know a witch called Louise Figg-Clearwater?"

In one instant, Severus Snape felt his reality crumble before him. His life as Potions master and Head of Slytherin vanished away, as the events of fifteen years ago came rushing into the present. Suddenly, it was 1977 again and he was a young Death Eater raiding the home of top Auror Patrick Clearwater, Narcissa Harker and Kurt Rosier beside him, eager to avenge the death of Kurt's older brother Evan at Clearwater's hands. A raid which started off routine and nearly ended in disaster when Caitlin Tyler put in an unexpected appearance. The raid which had first led him to question his previously unswerving loyalty to Lord Voldemort, although if he was really honest about it, it wasn't the cause that had attracted him, but the opportunities. A raid which had left him haunted by a pair of cold, silver-blue eyes and the chilling promise that this victim would be back.

"Where did you hear that name?" he hissed at Luella, who, he realised, had eyes exactly the same colour as the witch she was asking about.

"She was my mother's cousin. Her mother, my great-aunt, was a Muggle-born witch. I never knew until this Christmas. Now I'm trying to find out about her."

Severus drew himself a mental family tree. He felt his blood run cold as the implications of it hit him. Louise Figg-Clearwater was a matrilineal relative of the Slytherin Redeemer, the family connections entirely through the female line. Which could only mean one thing. Tal-y-Rhys. He'd been cursed by the dying words of a Tal-y-Rhys witch with nothing left to lose and no reason to pull her punches. No wonder. No wonder his life since then had slowly disintegrated as he'd lost friends, his home, his career, his reputation and any chance of love.

"Why are you asking me?" he whispered. Don't, he silently implored her. Don't ask me this. You don't need to know I murdered a relative of yours.

Too late. He had a sinking feeling that the uncompromising look in Luella's eyes was telling him that she already knew exactly that. However, if he could avoid telling her, then he would.

"She was killed by Death Eaters." Luella leaned forward, resting her hands in his desk. Now that he knew about the relation, it was obvious. She looked just like her late Ravenclaw cousin, except with a self-assurance and power that the other witch had never possessed. At least, not until those final moments when something in her had snapped and Severus had begun to realise that maybe he'd underestimated her. "Were you one of them?"

The very bluntness of the question threw him completely offguard. He wasn't used to dealing with such directness. Slytherins typically preferred the opposite approach of edging the topic of conversation gradually round to the one they wanted to talk about then try and trap their opponent into letting slip the information they were after.

Luella had evidently been spending too much time around Gryffindors, learning their methods and giving them a Slytherin twist.

"Luella, I really don't think you need to know -"

"The truth, Professor." Luella's voice cut him dead, and the merest flicker of Glamoury in her eyes ended any argument on the subject. He might as well tell her while he still had some control over events.

"Alright. Alright, yes, damn you, I killed her. Satisfied?"

She didn't appear shocked. Either she was more self-controlled than he'd thought or his earlier guess had been right. She did know.

However, she clearly hadn't got her pound of flesh yet. "Not yet. How?"

Now here was a dilemma. He hated lying to her, and yet this wasn't the sort of thing you could just let slip. If she knew just what he was capable of...

"Luella, please, don't ask me that. You don't need to know that. Please, don't make me tell you."

"Professor. Tell me!" She snarled the last two words at him, a verbal slap in the face that, even without added Glamoury, would have had him giving in. Then, more terrible than that, fury gave way to a desperate pleading that melted his last defences. "Please. Please, Professor, I need to know, I need to know what happened, I need to know why." Her voice died to a whisper. "I need to know. Please. I mean, you knew her, even if it was only for a little while. You saw her, you spoke to her, what did she say? What was she thinking? What was she like?"

Severus reached out and took her hand. What to say to her? What the hell did you say in this sort of situation? And yet Luella's eyes demanded some kind of answer.

"Luella. Oh, Luella. I don't know if you'll like this. And I have no idea if it'll give you what you're looking for. But I'll tell you what I can. May the gods forgive me." He looked down, unwilling to bear Luella's eyes on him any more. "It wasn't personal. Not for me, anyway, although some of my colleagues had other ideas. You see, Louise Figg-Clearwater had the bad luck to be married to a Muggle-born Auror. One who'd captured and in some cases killed Death Eaters. Including the brother of one of my companions that night. I'll spare you the details of what we did. But I will confess how she died. I placed her husband under the Imperius Curse and made him do it." He forced himself to look at her again, trying to see how she'd reacted. To his surprise, she seemed to be taking it rather well. She'd lowered her eyes, but she didn't seem shocked or surprised, confirming his suspicions that she already knew the bare facts.

"Go on." she whispered. "What happened?"

"If it's any consolation, she died well. She didn't beg for mercy, cry, or anything like that. She died with strength and with dignity. Like a true Tal-y-Rhys. Her death was the first I'd caused that gave me no pleasure. She had power, Luella. Power, like all

your line have. I knew, even as I looked into her eyes, that I had no power over her and never would have. Even killing her wouldn't change that. Maybe that's why I did it so quickly. Couldn't bear feeling inferior. Didn't make any difference. I still dream that her eyes are watching me. I still can't get her last words out of my head."

"What were they?" Luella whispered, enthralled.

"By the power of the Most High Gods, may your conscience wake from the coma you've beaten it into and never cease to torment you until you've paid for what you've done. And may you too know what it's like to see someone you love suffer like this. And this also I promise - in my next life, I'll find you." Severus laughed. "And it happened. Every word. My conscience woke that very night. It started tormenting me, and it didn't stop until Caitlin finally settled the score. Until you healed me." He looked at her again. So like Louise. Too like her. And born a year after her death. A thought began to occur to him. "The only promise of hers that hasn't come true is the last part. She hasn't found me yet."

He studied Luella's reaction carefully. Just as he thought. He'd seen a twinge of guilt before all emotion had been ruthlessly wiped clean from the girl's face. There was far more to this curiosity of Luella's than a simple desire to find out about her family. Far more.

"Melissa tells me you met Patrick Clearwater over the holidays." he said, trying to stay as neutral as possible. "What did you think of him? Did you get on?"

"He seemed like a nice enough man." Luella's composure remained intact, held together by a determination not to give anything away. However, it didn't seem quite as solid as it had done. He was right, she was hiding something.

"You liked him then. Tell me, Luella, was that all you felt? Didn't feel as if you'd known him before?"

"No." He could tell she was lying.

"Didn't feel attracted to him in any way?"

"No!" Luella yelled, leaping to her feet, scarlet with rage. "Sir, do you mind telling me just what the hell you're getting at?"

"Luella, do you believe in reincarnation?"

That stopped her. The colour drained out of her face.

"I don't know." she whispered. "Caitlin tells me mages reincarnate, but I don't know if it really happens."

"You do. You do, or else you wouldn't be here. Out with it, Luella. Why are you really here today?"

Luella gazed back at him miserably, clearly torn between confessing or keeping quiet. The tables were well and truly turned. Finally, she sunk back into her seat.

"Alright, yes. I had a vision of Louise's death, from her point of view. I think I'm her come back."

Severus had thought he'd been prepared for the admission. He was wrong. He'd been completely unprepared for the guilt and horror that was now threatening to overwhelm him. He buried his head in his hands.

"Gods. Oh gods. Luella, I..." He finally dared to meet her eyes. "Luella, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Can you ever... I mean, will you ever forgive me?"

She didn't seem to have heard him. She was just staring at him, shocked, pale, trembling.

"Oh god." she whispered. "Oh god, I should never have told you. I shouldn't have said anything. I'd better go." She got up and moved hastily for the door.

"Luella, wait." Severus was after her in a second. As she reached for the door handle, he caught hold of her by the wrist and spun her round to face him. She didn't resist, just stared back at him in terror. It didn't help his own feelings. Dear gods, he thought, does she think I'm going to repeat myself?

"Luella, it's alright." He pulled her into his arms, soothing her as best he could. "It's alright. You're safe, I won't hurt you."

"I'm sorry." she sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said anything, Caitlin made me promise not to tell you that, I'm really sorry." Her fear seemed to have abated, as she was now burying her face in his robes, crying openly.

"You've got nothing to apologise for." he told her, leading her back to her seat, pulling up another chair so he could sit beside her. "Nothing at all. It's me who should be apologising."

Luella sank back into her chair. "I know, but I didn't want to hurt you. I knew you'd feel guilty and I didn't want you to. Didn't want to upset you."

"Never mind my feelings." Severus replied brusquely. "I'm far more worried about yours. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course I can." Luella dried her eyes, and finally allowed herself a smile. "Did you ever know her mother? Arabella Figg."

"Not personally, but the entire common room got regular updates on her from Louise's Slytherin sister. Is the old battleaxe still alive?"

"She is." Luella giggled.

"My apologies. Do you see much of her?"

"Not really. Mum and Dad used to take me to see her as a kid, but I was always terrified of her. Used to have nightmares about her chasing after me, trying to turn me into something or chop me up for use in a potion. Now I know why. Past-life memories."

Severus nodded, beginning to understand. "She always did treat her daughters as extensions of herself. I suppose all parents do that to a certain extent, but she was the worst I've ever seen. Diana fought her every step of the way, but I seem to remember Louise never quite having the courage."

"She didn't. She wanted to fight her, but could never bring herself to do it. So she sacrificed her own dreams to look after her mother, she got married, she became a housewife and hated every minute of it. Never even realised her own power until the last few minutes of her life." She gazed straight into Severus's eyes. "Until you made her angry and desperate enough to actually use it. Angry enough to decide in the afterlife that when she came back, she'd never be that weak and submissive again. To agree wholeheartedly when Morgan Tal-y-Rhys made her an offer she couldn't refuse. Without you, I'd still be a downtrodden little housewife, at her mother's beck and call, probably on my way to either a divorce or a nervous breakdown. Or both." She smiled at him. "Thank you."

"You're grateful?" This certainly wasn't the response he'd expected.

"I wouldn't say that. But I wouldn't be Luella Martin the Slytherin Redeemer without you, and I rather like being Luella. So let's just say I don't bear any grudges, I'm not out for vengeance and you don't need to apologise."

Severus still couldn't quite believe it. "Luella, are you sure?"

"Perfectly." A mischievous smile that was pure Slytherin flickered across her face. "Do you want me to exact a terrifying vengeance?"

"Not especially. I've already had one from Caitlin. That was quite enough." He shivered at the memory before swiftly pushing it away. "Luella, I... Thank you. For not hating me."

"No trouble." Again the mischievous smile. "After all, I only said I'd come after you. I never said what I'd do when I found you."

"Very true." However, pleased as he was that Luella wasn't too traumatised, he still owed her. "Luella, is there anything I can do for you? You know, to make it up to you? Anything at all. I feel I owe you something. Although I feel bound to point out that increasing the Potions grade of any student beyond that which their work merits is not an option."

"There is one thing." Luella faltered, confidence turning to hesitancy.

"Name it."

"Will you help me? Redeem Slytherin, I mean."

Severus blinked. Was that all she wanted? "Luella, you already know I will."

"Well, yes. But that's not the point. You're doing it because Mrs. Lovegood told you to. Or because Professor Dumbledore put you in charge of Slytherin, so you feel it's your job. I don't want you to do it because it's your duty. I want you to do it because you want to. Because..." she hesitated, "because you care about me."

And there he'd been thinking it would be something virtually impossible or shameful. Once more, he pulled her close to him. She gave in almost at once, nestling against him in a way that was comforting and yet mildly disturbing.

"Luella. You don't need to ask. I do care about you. I am not doing this purely because Melissa told me to. Not any more, anyway. If Melissa owed me tomorrow and told me she was taking me off the case, I would still continue to take an interest. I would still be there for you. If Dumbledore put someone else in charge of Slytherin or sacked me altogether, I would still keep in touch with you. Why? Precisely because you are special in your own right, and not just because of your title. Too much has happened, far too much, for me to see you as just one more duty. Worry no more, I'll do what you ask and more if I have to."

Luella smiled, hugged him and sat up, breaking the embrace. "Thanks. It means a lot to me." Something else seemed to occur to her. "Sir, you said Louise had a sister. Is she still alive?"

Severus shook his head. "No. She too was killed by Death Eaters, although before I joined them. She was an Auror, and a Slytherin. She was a Chaser on the Quidditch team, and a good one too. Caitlin knows her better than I did; the two of them were very close. I remember Caitlin was devastated when she died. That's where Deanna got her name from, I believe. Diana Figg was a popular girl. We all missed her. Love her or hate her, she made life interesting. She certainly was a character. I think you would have liked her."

"I think so." Luella started to grin. "Diana, did you say her name was?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Just that I don't think I'm the only Figg girl to have reincarnated as a fourteen year old Slytherin."

It dawned on Severus who she was talking about. "You don't mean..."

"I do. She sounds just like her younger namesake. Diana was an Auror, Deanna wants to be one more than anything, and she's certainly got the talent to do it. She's born within a month of me, as if she wanted to be around at the same time as her sister and help her out. The two of us have always got on, always. Deanna's not generally given to taking an instant liking to people, but she took one to me. She's a Quidditch Chaser too, and a good one. My god, we really were sisters. Amazing!" Luella laughed, throwing her head back in delight.

"Deanna Tyler was Diana Figg. My god." Now that he thought of it, it was the only reasonable conclusion. The two were so similar in personality, he was amazed he'd never noticed it before. "Does Caitlin have any idea what she's given birth to?"

"I wouldn't worry." Luella reassured him. "You said Diana and Caitlin were friends. And Deanna's always got on well with her mother. Caitlin'll be fine."

"You and I on the other hand are doomed. Luella, if you do decide to tell her about who you both were, I'd much rather you didn't mention me."

"Don't worry. She won't know a thing. Tell you what though, I hope she never meets my great-aunt."

"Now that would be an interesting confrontation. Although one best watched from a nice safe distance."

"Like through a crystal ball on the other side of the country."

"My thoughts exactly."

"We'd better make sure they never meet then." Luella got up, brisk all of a sudden. "Right. I'm going off to find her. Bet she'll love to hear this."

"No doubt. Just remember your promise, Luella. Not a word about me."

Luella promised not to tell her, and with that, raced off to find her friend. Severus watched her go, and sat back, relaxing in a sudden rush of euphoria. For fifteen long years, he'd been haunted by Louise Figg's dying words. For fifteen years they'd followed him around, kicking his conscience into life, there at the back of his mind when he'd been forced to hurt Caitlin, with him every day, reminding him of what he'd done and never been punished for. He'd tried punishing himself, retreating to Hogwarts, shunning companionship and everything that made life worth living, but it hadn't worked. Nothing short of Sleeping Potion had made the nightmares go away. Not until Caitlin had attacked him in turn had they started to abate, and it wasn't until today that he'd really started to feel worthy of living again. Luella didn't bear any grudges. And he no longer felt indebted to Caitlin. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for him.

Of course, there was just one little thing that stood between him and living again. Namely, the witch who Luella had just rushed off to find. If Deanna Tyler ever found out about his past, he very much doubted she'd be quite so charitable as her friend. As far as Luella was concerned, he'd done her a favour, allowing her to exchange a life she'd hated for one she actually liked. From Deanna's point of view, he'd ruined her life and her mother's. The chances of her ever forgiving him were slim, to say the least. His best hope was that she never knew, and yet until she'd forgiven him too, he had a feeling he'd never be able to put his past behind him.

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Chapter Sixteen Uncoiled By Their Rivals

Luella raced out of Snape's office, mind whirling and emotions running wild, the excitement of this new revelation combining with the aftermath of the encounter just gone to send her into a manic high. Deanna used to be my sister! Cool! Intruding into that thought, however, was the memory of being so close to Snape, the fabric of his robes against her skin, the warmth of his arms around her, hearing his heartbeat right next to her ear. The mere thought of it caused her knees to buckle, the hormonal rush threatening to overwhelm her. She stopped walking, leaning against the wall, savouring the memory while she was still alone.

He'd said he cared about her. He'd held her. Not once but twice. Once again, the boundaries had blurred, and they'd been drawn into that familiar intimacy that terrified as it thrilled. An intimacy she couldn't resist, one that demanded no less than her very heart and soul. What she wouldn't give for more of that! And not just the intimacy. She knew she couldn't resist him, but there was also the satisfaction of knowing that in a way, she had an equal amount of power over him. The look of horror and guilt on his face when she'd blurted out the secret she'd not meant to reveal had told its own story. Yes, she'd felt awful, even scared, at the time. For the briefest of moments, as he'd snatched her wrist and spun her around, staring into her eyes, she'd relived the moment of Louise's death all over again. But the moment of panic had faded as he'd drawn her into his arms, laying any fears she may have had to rest. She was cared for, she was loved, she was safe. Safe forever, as long as he was with her. He'd never hurt her, never let any harm come to her. She was sure of that now. Sure that he couldn't stay impersonal for long where she was concerned, no more than he could with Deanna. Sure that she had power of a kind over him, the power to bring him running to her side at the merest hint of danger. Snape hadn't seen it, but even as he'd held her, told her she was special in her own right, a small smile of triumph had crossed her features. To have that power over someone, especially a grown man... Ecstasy! She resisted the urge to dance in the corridor. But she couldn't resist the urge to wrap her arms round herself with joy and smile blissfully. Then, with added spring in her step, she made her way down the corridor towards the main part of the school.

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She had not gone far when she heard a voice calling her name. Looking up, she saw a boy in Gryffindor colours running towards her. Harry.

"Lu, there you are!" he panted as he raced up to her. "I've been looking for you all over!"

"Have you?" Luella's current euphoria was too powerful to be ruthlessly swept aside as was usually the case, which meant that the first clear view Harry got of her was her beaming with happiness, looking as if her every dream had just come true. Which, Luella realised, probably explained why Harry had taken one look, blinked and immediately started blushing. Decisions, decisions. What's a Slytherin to do? Turn on the seductive wiles and make him even more nervous, or try and reassure the poor boy? In the end, Luella's sense of charity won out. One Glamour later, and the happiness had been turned down enough for Harry to regain his composure.

"Are you OK there, Harry? You look a bit... bewildered."

"Erm, yeah, yeah, I'm fine." he stammered. "Um, Lu, are you alright? I mean, it's just that you look really, er... Different."

"Different how?" Luella purred. Well, OK, maybe she couldn't resist teasing just a little.

"Just... I mean... you look nice." Harry finished lamely.

"Why, thank you!" Luella smiled. "Very sweet of you to notice, Harry. Was there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes, no, erm, maybe." Harry fidgeted on the spot, racking his brains as if to remember exactly what he'd wanted to ask her. "Did you hear about Ginny and Ron?" he said, as if to change the subject.

"Hear about it? Harry, the whole school heard about it. Ginny wasn't exactly keeping her voice down, was she?"

"Well, no." Harry admitted. "But what's your take on it? I mean, do you think Ginny was a bit hard on him?"

"Hard on him? Well, I suppose she was. However, sometimes that's exactly what's needed." Luella narrowed her eyes, daring him to disagree. "Are you seriously telling me Ron didn't completely overreact? Personally, I think it's wonderful that Ginny's finally stood up for herself. She seems a lot happier."

A look of relief settled on Harry's face. "I'm so glad you think so, Lu! That was what I was thinking too, although I couldn't say that to Ron obviously. I told Hermione what happened though, and she reckoned Ron's had it coming for weeks."

"Smart girl." Luella fell into step alongside Harry as the two of them headed out of the dungeons and back into the upper floors. "That's pretty much the consensus here too."

"There's a surprise." Harry grinned. "Is the party underway yet?"

"Not yet. Although I suspect that when I get back, I'll find the common room loaded down with stolen food and a party in full swing."

"Well, you've certainly got the perfect venue for it." Harry said, remembering the Slytherin common room's extravagant decorations. "I mean you've already got the lights and sound system in place..." His voice trailed off as he realised what he'd just said. Luella stopped in her tracks and turned to look at him, the dawning light of realisation in her eyes. Harry felt his heart sink as those cold blue eyes of hers stared piercingly into his.

"So." she said in a voice so like Snape's it was frightening. "It *was* you! Don't deny it Harry, we knew all along and you just confirmed it. You used Polyjuice Potion to

impersonate Crabbe and Goyle, didn't you? You and Ron, it must have been. Which is probably why Hermione's in the hospital wing. What happened with hers?"

"She used a cat hair instead of a human hair and turned into Catwoman." Harry said sheepishly. "The fur's gone from her face now, and her eyes are back to normal, but she's still got fur all over her arms and I didn't want to ask if the tail had gone. Lu, it's not funny!"

"Sorry." sniggered Luella. "It's just that... Hermione Granger... getting a potion so wrong!" She dissolved into peals of laughter that would have drawn attention had there been anyone around. As it was though, it was Saturday morning and most of the school were back in their common rooms by now.

"Stop laughing!" Harry snapped. "Hermione's very upset by it all. It's not her fault she picked a hair off Millicent Bulstrode's arm and it turned out to be a cat hair." His defences gave out at this point, as he too started laughing uncontrollably.

Luella finally dried her eyes. "Oh dear. Poor Mione. It's not funny really, is it?"

"No. Of course not." Harry composed himself. "We shouldn't laugh."

"No. We shouldn't." The two of them looked at each other, both fighting the urge to giggle again. Luella decided to change the subject. "So what were you two infiltrating our common room for anyway?"

Harry sobered up immediately, as he remembered why he'd been looking for Luella in the first place.

"Well, it was kind of about the Heir of Slytherin."

The smile vanished from Luella's face. "The Heir of Slytherin? What about her, I mean him?" she asked, her voice now sharp and demanding.

"That's it. We kind of thought it might be Malfoy, so we disguised ourselves and tried to get a confession out of him."

"Ingenious. I'm impressed. You should have asked us for help from the start, we've had a bit of experience in getting confessions out of our housemates." Luella recalled their own attempt at espionage three years ago. That had worked like a charm. It would have certainly been some achievement to get the younger Crabbe and Goyle, and Malfoy too, expelled as well.

"Wish we had now." Harry sighed despondently. "You could have made sure we didn't end up with a cat hair anyway. After all that effort, we're the none the wiser who it is. Malfoy says it's not him, and he doesn't know who it might be either. All we've got to go on is this legend of the Second Heir. Except Malfoy didn't really tell us much about it. Luella..." He hesitated, unsure if he was doing the right thing. However, he'd already started asking her, and they did need to know. What the hell, she could only say she didn't know.

"Lu, do you know the legend?" He held his breath, waiting. An eternity seemed to pass. At the mention of the Second Heir legend she'd frozen, her face going pale and the mask that imperceptibly slid across a Slytherin's face whenever you asked them a personal question slammed firmly in place on Luella's. Harry began to wonder whether this had been a good move.

"Hey, look, Lu, don't worry about it. You don't have to tell me. I was just curious. I'll leave you to it." He was about to move away when Luella reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Harry, wait."

Harry stopped walking and turned to look at her again. The Slytherin looked uncertain, as if wrestling with her conscience. Finally, she seemed to decide what to do.

"Alright. Alright, I'll tell you. But not here. Let's go somewhere we won't be heard."

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"You know, Lu, I'm getting just a bit tired of this place."

"Tough. This is the most private place in the school. I'm not risking anyone overhearing us - this is just too important."

"I know, but all the same, here?" Harry looked about him, wrinkling his nose in disgust as he took in the by now familiar first floor girls' toilets, trying to avoid the water covering the floor and threatening to invade his shoes. "Can't we go somewhere a little more comfortable?"

Luella chuckled. "You're as bad as Marls. Honestly, thought Gryffindors were meant to be models of stoicism and unflinching bravery?"

"We are brave!" Harry protested. "We can face armies of marauding Death Eaters without batting an eyelid. We'd just rather do it in comfort if at all possible."

Luella laughed out loud. "My god Harry, are you sure you don't belong in Slytherin after all? That is just so Draco Malfoy."

Harry shut up immediately. Luella immediately realised that she'd said the wrong thing. Harry's face was cold and emotionless, a common enough sight in Slytherin House but rare among the normally passionate Gryffindors. The thought occurred to her that maybe she'd hit just a bit too close to the bone. After all, hadn't Caitlin said that Harry had spent his childhood being ill-treated by his aunt and uncle? Hadn't she seen the abuse first-hand that summer? And wasn't a childhood from hell one of the many things that went to making a Slytherin? She cursed herself for not guessing sooner that maybe he'd almost not made it into Gryffindor.

"Hey look, Harry, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to compare you to Malfoy. Tactless of me."

"You don't know the half of it, Lu." Harry pushed open a cubicle and squatted on the floor. Luella followed him in, cast a Glamour round them and seated herself on the toilet lid. "The Sorting Hat nearly put me in Slytherin. The only reason it didn't was because I asked it not to. Because Hagrid had told me all the Dark wizards were Slytherins."

"But not all Slytherins are Dark wizards." Luella said quietly. "There's a difference, Harry."

He didn't seem to have heard her. "So close, Lu. I was that close. That close to joining the dark side. If I'd gone to Slytherin, I'd have turned into a Dark wizard. I would. I'd have hung out with Malfoy, become friends with him, starting nursing grudges against the Dursleys, maybe started believing all Muggles were like that, maybe started hating them, and anyone who'd grown up with them. I'd have been the next Lord Voldemort. It was that close, Luella, that close. I've been scared ever since, especially when I found out I could speak Parseltongue. I thought it really might be me. That I really might be..." He choked on the words.

"The Heir?"

Harry nodded. Luella knelt down next to him and put her arm round him.

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No." Harry whispered, burying his head on Luella's shoulder. She held him close for a few minutes, neither of them speaking, just holding each other in a silent communion, the one unable to talk, the other not knowing quite what to say. But Luella's uncertainty did not last long.

"You're not the Heir."

"You said that before."

"I know. But you need to hear it again. In fact, you need to hear a lot of things, Harry Potter. Look at me." Luella lifted his head up and gazed straight into his eyes. The Glamoury slammed into action almost at once, the Mark beginning to glow. It wasn't the hypnosis Glamoury. She didn't want him as some kind of mindless robot. What she had to say needed to be accepted by him of his own free will. So she opted instead for a Glamour that made her look like a true Heir of Slytherin.

"There is more to Slytherin than dark magic. Far more. The true spirit of Slytherin goes far beyond power-hungry Machiavellian social climbers, who simply crave material success. It embraces all who want something more from their lives, who want to be the best they can be and aren't afraid to work to get it." Thank you, Caitlin, Luella prayed silently. Seemed so long ago now, that summer afternoon when Caitlin had uttered those exact same words, in a very similar situation.

"Or worried about what they have to do in the process." said Harry bitterly.

"You know that's not true." Despite the stab of pain at his words, Luella kept her voice level.

"Yeah?" laughed Harry. "Tell that to Lord Voldemort."

"Harry!" Luella's self-control began to wear thin. She couldn't tune Harry out as easily as she could Ron. She swiftly pulled herself together. No use shouting at the boy. "Lord Voldemort isn't all there is to Slytherin, you know. We don't just do Dark Arts. There's a whole neglected seam of Slytherin power that has nothing to do with them, and properly used, can change the world for the better. Did you know that in virtually every single religion the world over, in virtually every culture bar one, the snake has been a symbol of healing and transformation, of divine power and wisdom? Did you? No, of course not. Because you never bothered to find out. Never bothered to look behind the propaganda and see for yourself. The Ravenclaws are about the only ones who ever do, which is why we get on better with them. Ah, Harry, can it be all that Gryffindor fire is blinding you?"

Harry wasn't sure how to react to that. It wasn't that he didn't understand Slytherin - he understood it all too well. But at the same time, he'd never seen anything but cruelty and hate in his own Slytherin side.

"I'm not blind." he whispered. "I'm just... scared." He hung his side, ashamed suddenly, ashamed of the fact that here was an allegedly brave Gryffindor admitting to being scared.

"Don't be." came the unexpectedly comforting response, soft and reassuring, with a tenderness no one had ever shown him before, not that he remembered anyway. Had his mother once spoken to him like that? He didn't know, would never know now. But Luella's gentle tones were a pretty good substitute. As she drew him near her once more, he gave into the embrace, slipping his arms around her waist and letting her hold him.

"Don't be scared of it. One day you might need it. One day it might save your life. Listen to me, Harry. You are not a Dark wizard, and you never will be. Not because you are Gryffindor, but because you can see your own inner darkness. You think you're the only one scared of ending up on the wrong side? You're not. Every Slytherin who hasn't gone over has to deal with that every day, the fear that maybe they're evil by nature, the fear of their power. Want to know something about Slytherin House, Harry? Something that most people never realise, although mainly that's because we do our level best to make sure no one else ever finds out."

"Go on." Harry murmured, intrigued to know what this mysterious secret was.

"OK. Although if anyone else hears about this, I'll have to kill you, you understand."

"Got it."

"Alright then. It's this: we're scared, Harry. Absolutely terrified. All of us. Me, Deanna, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, all of us. Except maybe Marls. And that's only

because she had to face all her inner demons back in the first year. Everyone else, though, is frightened through and through."

"Frightened?" Harry looked up, unable to believe his ears. "What on earth of?" He couldn't imagine the like of Malfoy or Deanna ever being frightened. And yet it would explain a lot about how Slytherins were able to hide their feelings so well...

"It varies. Everyone's got their own demons. Mostly though, it isn't anything at all, nothing concrete. Just a fear that the world could turn on you at any time, that you can't really trust anyone in case they try and hurt you. That's why we're so ambitious, I think. If we have enough money and power, we think we'll be safe. Of course it never works, so we just keep on trying to get more and more, and we turn into that typical Slytherin stereotype. All because we had crap childhoods. Which most of us did."

"So how come Ginny's a Slyth and her brothers aren't?" Harry asked. "And don't say it was because she grew up poor. Money doesn't seem to have anything to do with it - after all, look at Malfoy. She got treated no worse than her brothers - better if anything. She was the baby of the family and the only girl. And from what Ron tells me, she was as spoilt as anyone could be in the Weasley household."

"Now there's another exception." Luella smiled. "Ginny. A Slytherin raised by Gryffindors, and mentored by the one Slytherin who's generally not afraid of anything and relatively trauma-free. She too is not scared, at least not anymore. And that, I think, is because her reasons for being Slytherin are fairly straightforward and not based on the need for a security blanket. She's sick of being poor. She's sick of being looked down on and being labelled as a Weasley. At home, she's used to being the centre of attention and generally getting doted on, and she'd quite like that in the real world too. Hence, she's ambitious, without being neurotic about it. Same with Marls. She's also the spoilt youngest child and only girl. Like Ginny, she has a father who dotes on her and a mother who would discipline her but is generally too wrapped up in other things. In Ginny's case, her mother's too busy chasing after the rest of the family, in Marlie's because her mother's too busy running the biggest and most important Department at the Ministry. Marlie's never been poor, on the contrary she's always had everything she ever wanted. But she'd quite like to keep it that way, and she certainly doesn't like losing. Which is why she's on the winning team, as she sees it."

"They didn't do too well last year." Harry grinned.

"Harry. Shut up." Luella grimaced, the memory still a little too fresh in his mind. "Besides, I seem to remember it was Marlie saving your neck that gifted the game to Gryffindor. Have a little respect."

"Sorry. I'll try."

"Thank you. Anyway, back to Marls. She too is in Slytherin for non-fear based reasons. She loves the sweet smell of success, but if it doesn't go her way, she won't think it's the end of the world. Sure, she'll sulk and throw tantrums, but she'll deal with it and then start working out how to get it back. Nothing keeps her down for long, mainly because she's used to abundance. She has never had to worry about losing

anything, because there has always been more of the same, or something better, to take its place. Same with Ginny. She never had that much materially, compared to some of her housemates, but one thing she was never short of was affection. She didn't have to earn it, she didn't have to work for it, she got it for free, virtually on tap. The same principle applies. She too is used to getting what she wants. Do you see where I'm coming from here?"

"They're not scared because they believe that something will always turn up eventually. Is that right?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Luella's mind shot back to that night in September, when Snape had lectured her on keeping her innocence, her faith in the world, and had singled out Marlie as someone who had it. Now she was beginning to understand what he'd meant.

Harry was still thinking, and beginning to draw some conclusions of his own. "And the rest of them are scared because they secretly think it won't."

"Something like that, yes."

It clicked. All of a sudden, it dawned on Harry just what made Slytherin House tick. "Marlie and Ginny are optimists - they think the world likes them and if it doesn't they'll blame the world for being too blind to realise it. But the rest of Slytherin are pessimists - that is, they think the world is out to get them and even if things are going well, they'll just be waiting for the hammer to drop."

"Got it in one. There you have it, Harry. That's why so many of us are scared. Because we didn't get that unconditional love as kids. Maybe something happened, or maybe it was just a sense that if we weren't what our parents wanted, we weren't good enough."

Luella broke off and gazed into space, a shadow of pain flickering across her face, as if she was recalling some private memory. "If we weren't what our parents wanted, we weren't good enough." she repeated, as if in a dream.

"Lu..." Harry began, reaching for her arm to try and settle her. She turned back to him, all dreaminess fading away.

"How did you do it?" she demanded. "How did you grow up the way you did, with the Dursleys, and not end up as one of us? How the hell did you never fantasise about killing all of them, or at least torturing them until they begged for mercy? How is it that you never felt the urge to take on the world, just prove to them you really were something special? Why the hell are you such a saint?" Luella nearly screamed the final sentence at him before bursting into tears.

Harry watched in shock. He wasn't used to seeing real tears - Dudley's tantrums didn't count - and he hadn't got a clue how to deal with it. His best hope was that she got over it and quickly. However, he wasn't completely lost. Putting an arm round her shoulders, he tried to comfort her.

"I'm sorry." he whispered. Luella wiped her tears away and looked at him again.

"Damn it, Potter, how'd you manage it, eh? I didn't have a childhood half as bad as yours, and yet I'm still stuck with this wound that won't heal. Wish to God my parents had locked me in my room and starved me, at least then I'd have an excuse. As it is, all I've got is this sense that I'm a failure, that in my parents' eyes I'll never be good enough, because I'm not the popular, talented credit to the family that they wanted. They wanted a beautiful, charming, socially adept leader of the in-crowd. They got me, the lonely misfit with no social skills whatsoever, who'd rather spend the afternoon alone with a book, or in the garden or just outside in a secret place no one else could get to. All this I had to deal with, knowing that my parents thought I was a disappointment, that everyone at school hated me, that all I had was Deanna, and then they found out I was a witch. My god, that was fun. Caitlin, that's Deanna's mum, ended up having to talk them round. Thank god for Caitlin and Deanna, I don't know what I'd have done without them. And that, by Slytherin standards, is considered a good childhood. So how'd you grow up with something far, far worse and not get scarred? Why aren't you Slytherin?"

"I don't know." Harry whispered. "I don't know! Because by all rights I should be. I'm not a saint! Every day, every bloody day, I used to dream about getting my revenge on all of them. I used to fantasise about going away and becoming really rich and successful, then coming back and watching them grovel before turning away in contempt. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I still do." He smiled this strange, twisted smile that Luella never thought she'd see on a Gryffindor face. "I still do want it. It's not my deepest desire, but it's definitely in the top three. At the back of my mind, it's there constantly, this little fantasy of what I'd like to do to them. That's why I'm scared, Lu. That's my Slytherin side. Deep down inside, I know I'm capable of doing the most horrible things. And I've spent all my life since trying to stop it winning. Even now, I'm still not sure I really belong in Gryffindor. I'm still scared that I'm only really here because I didn't want to be in Slytherin. I feel like such a fraud, Lu! I just hope Ron doesn't find out..."

His voice trailed off. Luella held him in silence. So that was why he'd feared he might be the Heir. Now wasn't that interesting? Harry Potter, the famous hero who'd defeated the Dark Lord, was tormented by the thought that he might become one himself. The natural reaction was to gloat, but if she was really honest about it, her heart wasn't in it. In fact, she actually felt far closer to him than she ever really had before. Now she'd seen his secret fear, it made him seem more... human. She lifted his chin, turning his face towards hers. Cute. Very cute. Admittedly he was only twelve right now, but one day he was going to make some lucky girl a very happy lady indeed.

"You're not a fraud. And you're not evil. Even if you should have been a Slytherin, what does your house have to do with anything? Deanna's got your problem in reverse - what else is that hot temper and barely controlled rage but a rather primitive Gryffindor side? That's more likely to get her in trouble than her ambition. And yet that same side of her could equally well make her a hero one day. Same goes with your Slytherin side. In the right circumstances, a bit of ruthlessness might be exactly what you need. It's all a matter of doing the right thing at the right time, and making

sure you can control it instead of the other way round. Holds true for all of us, Slytherin and Gryffindor alike, although most people prefer to look the other way when the subject of dark sides comes up. The only thing that makes Slytherin different is that its members tend to have more problematic dark sides, and post-Voldemort, we don't have the option of looking the other way anymore. It's either deal with it constructively or give in. You're not a Slytherin, but you do have that in common with us - you can't ignore it either. But that doesn't mean you're doomed." She pushed his fringe back out of his eyes, getting a good look at them gazing up at her in awe, two vivid pools of green, beautiful and alluring like the sea, and potentially as dangerous, not out of malice but simply because of what they were. Those were eyes you could drown in given the chance. Luella wondered who he'd inherited them from and what house they'd been in. Slytherin eyes, almost definitely. She resumed talking.

"Even in Slytherin, you would never have joined the dark side. You know it far too intimately, see it far too clearly to be taken in by it. It is precisely because you feel you are in danger from it that you will not succumb. Those who believe it won't hurt them, or that they are safe from it, they are the ones most likely to join of their own free will or be tricked by it. Whereas those of us who have to fight the battle every single day are far harder to deceive. Don't fear your Slytherin side, Harry. There is much it can teach you about good and evil, and knowing the difference. Use it wisely, and no one will ever fool you again. You'll be able to see things for what they are. Admittedly, the price is that you won't be able to retreat behind any comforting illusions about the world, but I don't think you had that many in the first place. It can lead to cynicism. But if you can learn the trick of keeping that knowledge, and at the same time regain the ability to enjoy life, you'll find it well worth the effort. It's a Fall from Grace and no mistake - why else do you think those who know no better have snakes down as the original tempters? But for every fall, there is a redemption, and I believe that brings us back to your original question."

She let the Glamour that had automatically woven itself around her fade away. Harry, released from its spell, shivered and blinked, trying to restore some sense of normality. It didn't work. He couldn't get rid of the emotions he'd felt as Luella had been speaking to him, of the strange and disturbing desire to throw himself at her feet, to surrender himself to her, offer up himself up body and soul to whatever cause she was espousing. He'd been entirely at her mercy, and what was more she knew it. In fact, he was still entirely at her mercy. One hand was still resting on his shoulder, and the other in her lap, perilously close to his knee. He found himself willing it to move closer, willing both hands to reach out for him and pull him in, render him helpless and subject him to every wanton desire that a Slytherin's psyche could come up with.

He came to his senses with a jolt, realising just what he was thinking. Shocked at himself, he backed away from her. She didn't try and stop him. She just watched him calmly with those terrifying eyes of hers, those beautiful eyes that seemed to strip away his defences and call on him to surrender his soul.

Slowly, Harry picked himself up and dared to look at her directly. Whatever power had been radiating from her appeared to have subsided, for she looked quite normal again. However, there was an oddly detached look of curiosity in her eyes, as if she regarded him as a plaything designed purely for her amusement. Trying to ignore the

part of him that desperately wanted to be Luella Martin's plaything, he rallied his courage.

"What are you?" he whispered.

"Just an ordinary Slytherin teenager." came the mischievous reply. "Who can occasionally put on quite a show when she puts her mind to it. Are you OK now, Harry?"

"I think so." He shook himself. "Luella, what was all that? About good and evil, and stuff. And what does it have to do with the Second Heir?"

"Everything. The path of Slytherin is a difficult and dangerous one. It involves meeting your innermost fears and demons, confronting evil at its worst, and overcoming it. Choosing not to take that road without falling into the trap of projecting it outside you. Accepting the darkness and turning it into something useful. But that's by no means an easy task. Small wonder so many Slytherins end up giving into it and taking the easy route to power that it offers. Our reputation is justified in many respects. But not all. You know the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

"Yeah. Salazar Slytherin built it after Godric Gryffindor kicked him out of Hogwarts. He left a monster hidden inside it until his true Heir would turn up and use it to get rid of the Muggle-borns. But where does the Second Heir fit in? Salazar would only need one, wouldn't he?"

"Of course. Salazar only needs one Heir. But who said the Second Heir is heir to Salazar?" Again that mischievous grin, as Luella began toying with a strand of his hair.

"Not Salazar Slytherin's Heir?" Harry blinked. "But... who else's Heir would he be?"

"Typical Gryffindor male!" Luella sighed. "Harry, you disappoint me. Once again you've fallen for the usual trap men fall into, creating complex mysteries when the truth is really quite simple, by disregarding the other half of society."

"I don't understand." Harry said, his mind a blank.

"Harry you fool. You're leaving out the women! The Second Heir is not a he but a she. Salazar was not the only Slytherin - he was married, twice. And he had children. One of whom belonged to a very powerful dynasty of witches called the Tal-y-Rhys. Her name was Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, and it is from her that Second Heir will be descended."

"Oh. Right." Harry scratched his head, none the wiser. "And what does the Second Heir do? Does he get rid of Muggle-borns too?"

"No." Luella snapped at him. "She is there to try and stop the first. See, Morgan wasn't a power-crazed despot like her father. She took after her mother, who was quite nice and well-balanced. When she heard what he'd done, she was horrified. She tried her best, but there was no way she could even begin to undo the enchantments

he'd laid. So she decided to beat him at his own game. She put her own spells on the Chamber and made a prophecy stating that fifty years after the first Heir had come, he would be followed by the Second Heir, who would take him on in battle and defeat him. She would then bring about peace between the houses and heal the wounds of magical society. And she's going to need help from Gryffindor to do it, that's the whole point. Do you understand what I'm saying here?"

"So, the Second Heir's one of the good guys then?" Harry said, uncertainly.

"Yes."

"Not out to kill lots of people, then?"

"Not unless I- I mean, she has to, no."

"Not trying to wipe out all the Muggle-borns at all?"

"Hardly." For some reason, Luella seemed to find that idea rather amusing. By this time however, Harry had given up trying to fathom out what was going on so he thought nothing of it. There was however one thing he couldn't work out at all.

"So if the Second Heir's not evil, who's carrying out all the attacks?"

At this, a shadow crossed Luella's face.

"I don't know. But this I tell you, it isn't the Second Heir. I do have one lead though."

"And that is?" Harry leaned forward attentively.

"We think the First Heir might be involved. Or, to be more accurate, someone using his power for their own ends."

"But didn't they catch the First Heir fifty years ago?" Harry asked, confused.

"Don't be silly. Of course not. He's still very much at large. Why else do you think we still need a Second Heir?"

"Well... I suppose... when you put it like that..." Harry admitted.

"Exactly, Harry. However, we've reason to believe that there's little risk of him being here in person. But we do think that there might be some artefact or something that is able to manifest his power and someone might be using that to do the attacks."

"Someone like Malfoy, you mean." Harry said grimly.

"Very possibly, although we've no idea who it is. It really could be anyone." Luella sighed.

Another thought occurred to Harry. "Lu, why do you keep saying 'we'? Who else is involved?"

"Quite a few of us, Harry. You'd be surprised. Don't know how much I should tell you, but let's just say for now that there's a group of us dedicated to helping the Second Heir succeed in her task."

"What, the Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked. The look Luella gave him once again reminded him that where Slytherins were concerned, he had a lot to learn.

"Now, now." Luella chided him. "The Ministry's official position is that there's no truth to the Heir of Slytherin legends whatsoever. Everyone from Mr. Fudge downwards will tell you that."

Gryffindor though he was, Harry wasn't completely naive. And he was beginning to appreciate the way in which Slytherin minds worked.

"And what's the Ministry's unofficial position?"

"Couldn't tell you." Luella grinned. "I don't work there."

Harry groaned in exasperation. Clearly getting any information out of Luella on the subject of this secretive little group she was part of was a lost cause. However, there was just one more thing he had to ask.

"Luella, who is the Second Heir? Do you know?"

The Slytherin froze. However, before she could think of a convincing lie or summon up some Glamour, they were both distracted by a noise. The sound of the door opening.

Harry turned to Luella, his mouth open, about to speak. Luella pressed a finger to her lips and cast a Glamour over him. Far easier to talk her way out of things if whoever it was could only see her. From outside, they could hear voices.

"Are you sure no one'll see us here?" came a boy's voice. It sounded familiar, although Luella couldn't place it at all. Harry, however, recognised it at once and sat bolt upright, listening very carefully indeed.

"Course not." a girl replied. This time, Luella had no trouble recognising her. Penelope Clearwater. "No one ever comes here. Especially not since the attacks started."

"No one except my brother and his friends. Honestly Penny, if Ron walks in on us, I'll never live it down."

"Ashamed of me, are you?" There was a distinct note of resentment to her voice.

"No, of course not, dear." the boy hastily reassured her. "You know I think you're wonderful. And I'd love to show you off, you know I would. But I'm a Prefect, if the other pupils knew I had a girlfriend they'd show me no respect whatsoever. Especially my brothers."

"And they show you so much at the moment, don't they?" Penelope teased.

"I'll have you know the younger pupils regard me as something of a mentor. A role model, someone they can look up to. Only last week, those Slytherin second year girls were asking my advice on how they could follow in my footsteps. Very attentive and polite, they were."

"Yes, and while you were pontificating on the virtues of self-discipline, that Malfoy kid was creating a sign above your head saying 'Percy Weasley is a Smeghead.'"

Luella realised where she'd heard the voice before. It was Fred and George's older brother, Percy the Prefect, or 'Bonehead' as his brothers usually referred to him. And he was dating her cousin? Oh god, this was going to make for some fun family gatherings. Although Percy seemed intent on keeping it quiet so it looked as if she was safe. And there was also little risk of her parents ever meeting Percy - his company was depressing enough without having to listen to her mother saying what a nice young man he was then pointedly saying that at least one member of the family had found a suitable boyfriend, looking at Luella the whole time. Once more, she silently gave thanks for ending up at a boarding school, far, far away from her parents.

"Now, now, Penny." Percy was saying. "It wasn't that nice Miss Parkinson's fault that Malfoy's not grown out of the puerile humour stage yet. You should have seen Miss Zabini blushing. She looked quite embarrassed."

"She was trying to stop laughing. And you're more naive than I took you for if you thought Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy hadn't planned it all along. Honestly, Percy, they're always making fun of you behind your back. Maybe if they saw you letting your hair down and acting like a normal human being, they might be less inclined to tease you. Come on, Percy, will you promise me you'll think about it?"

"Penny..." Percy protested.

"Please?"

Luella had never had Penelope Clearwater, or indeed any of the Ravenclaw girls, down as the type to pout and flutter their eyelids when talking to a man. However, it appeared she'd been wrong.

"Oh for god's sake. Alright, alright, I'll think about it!"

"Thank you, darling. That's all I ask."

Luella decided at this point that she'd better make her presence felt before either of them said or did anything embarrassing. Not to mention before Harry gave them both away by bursting out laughing. He was already starting to snigger. Getting to her feet, Luella carefully opened the toilet door and emerged, coughing delicately.

"Erm... am I interrupting anything?"

Percy spun round, his face pale with horror. Penelope on the other hand seemed overjoyed to see her again.

"Lu! How are you! Great to see you again! Percy, this is my cousin Luella Martin. Luella, this is Percy Weasley, but you probably knew that."

"Everybody knows Percy Weasley." Luella smiled. "Ginny talks about you all the time. She's always saying what a brilliant older brother you are. She thinks the world of you. Really looks up to you."

Luella's words had the desired effect. Percy's face went the same colour as his hair.

"Does she really? I - I mean, that's great, I mean, that's really nice of her, I - yes, of course she does. Ginny and I, we've always been close. I like to think I've been something of a mentor to her." The air of benevolent paternalism reminded Luella of Lockhart. However, unlike Lockhart, Percy still appeared to have retained some form of humility. There was hope for him yet. If Penelope took him well in hand, he might yet turn out to be quite agreeable.

"She certainly likes you." Luella upped the charm a bit. Maybe here was an opportunity to do Ginny a little favour. "That's why she's in Slytherin, you know. She wanted to be like you so much, the Sorting Hat could only pick up on all that ambition and put her with us."

"Really?" Percy's pomposity melted away entirely. "Oh... that's... that's really nice..."

Luella shot a look at Penelope, who was looking on and smiling approvingly. The older girl winked at her, giving her a thumbs up. Luella smiled back.

"Anyway, I'd best be going. Give you two some privacy." A knowing look that indicated Luella knew exactly what they were doing there. Penelope blushed, while Percy immediately began squirming.

"Ah. Erm, Luella, you, er, won't tell anyone we were here, will you? Not that either of us were up to anything we shouldn't have been, you understand, but it could prove rather embarrassing. You see what I mean."

"Of course." Luella replied levelly. "I will be the soul of discretion. You have my word."

"Thank you." said Percy. "Well, I'd better be off. Us Prefects don't have much time to relax. Nice to have met you, Luella. Coming, Penny?"

"In a minute. I just want to have a quick chat with Lu."

"OK. See you in a bit." Percy headed out, ears still pink. Penelope turned to Luella.

"I should be telling you off for lying like that, but I think it turned out for the best, don't you? He's really flattered by that."

"Well, if it gets him treating Ginny nicely again, it will be well worth it."

At this, Penelope looked worried.

"Oh lord, I just thought. What if he talks to Ginny and finds out she thinks nothing of the sort? Then what?"

"I wouldn't worry." Luella reassured her. "She's a Slytherin and Marlie's protégée as well. She should have the wit to play along. Hope so anyway. If not, I'll have to weasel my way out of it and pretend I misunderstood the situation."

"Well, whatever, I think you've made his day!" smiled Penelope. "You know, he's so different underneath that public persona of his. Really generous and sweet, not at all bossy and pompous like he can seem sometimes. When we're alone, he is the most wonderful man in the world. I just wish he'd be like that in public too." Penelope sighed, frustrated.

"Guess it can't be easy, having to keep it under wraps the whole time." mused Luella. "How long have you been seeing him for?"

"Since last May. We ran into each other by chance in the library while revising for our exams. He kept asking me what the time was, or if I knew where to find such and such a book, or if he could borrow a quill or parchment. Eventually, I asked him if anything was the matter, and he confessed he was just making excuses to talk to me, because I had really nice eyes. Then he asked me out and I was so taken aback I said yes. It all sort of went on from there."

"And you've been keeping it quiet all that time. Wow." Luella said in admiration, partly at their ability to keep it a secret somewhere like Hogwarts all that time, and partly at Penelope's patience.

"Yeah. Impressive, isn't it?" Penelope laughed bitterly. "A boyfriend I can't even talk about. Having to listen to Mum and Rachel chat about boys and clothes and things, then Mum asking me if I'm seeing anyone, and having to say no. Then they just give me these pitying looks and say never mind, and it just feels horrible. You know Lu, it's at times like that I can't help being reminded that Annabel's only my stepmum. Her and Rachel, they've got this cool mother-daughter bond going on and I feel really left out sometimes. Wonder if my real mum'd feel sorry for me being single." Penelope looked at the floor, downcast.

"She wouldn't." Luella said, her heart going out to her. For a moment, she felt a few pangs of guilt at Penelope having to grow up motherless. She brushed them aside. After all, she was Luella now. But that didn't mean she didn't care. "She wouldn't have minded at all. Besides, I rather think she'd have guessed you were seeing someone and had it out of you."

"You think so?"

"Sure of it. That's if you hadn't told her yourself."

"Which I might well have done. You know, I really miss her, Lu. Annabel's OK, but it's not the same. Still, it could be worse and I still have Dad. And you, now." She smiled at Luella suddenly. "It's cool finally meeting my real mum's family, you know? Sort of helps me imagine what she was like. And it's something I've got that really is mine. Relatives that'll put me first for a change, that don't have any other family ties. Having you at Hogwarts is great! A magical relative I don't have to share with the twins. It's fantastic."

"I know. I know just how you feel!" Penelope's happiness was obviously contagious, for Luella couldn't stop smiling either. "I was thinking something similar myself. Having a magical relative here at Hogwarts makes me feel a lot more at home. Kind of like I really do have a right to be here. You've no idea how important that is to me."

"No, but from what I've heard about Slytherin, I can imagine." said Penelope grimly. She placed a sympathetic hand on Luella's shoulder. "Can't be easy being Muggle-born when all your housemates have family and money all over the place and lineages stretching back to the Founding."

"It's not so bad, really." For some reason, even though Luella knew that what Penelope was saying was true, she felt the urge to defend her house. "I mean, no one ever says anything to my face, and believe me, I feel a lot more at home there than I would anywhere else. Just I can feel a little out of place there sometimes. Wouldn't swap for the world though."

"Not even to Ravenclaw?" Penelope said, with the merest hint of sadness.

"After two weeks, the constant studying and debating of intellectual minutiae would wear me out. I'd start to miss all the internal politics and constant scheming. Say what you like about Slytherin, it's never dull."

"You really don't know the twins that well, do you?" said Penelope wryly. "Come on, let's go. Fancy coming to the library? Hitting the books?"

"Maybe later. I've got a couple of errands to run."

"No problem. See you later, Lu!" Penelope disappeared back into the school.

Luella waited until the door closed behind her before opening the cubicle door and removing the protective Glamour.

"It's alright, they've gone. You can come out now, Harry."

"Thank God for that, I thought you two were going to stand around chatting all day." Harry staggered into the open, massaging his legs, trying to restore some sense of feeling. "You have no idea how uncomfortable it is sitting crouched down in a small space unable to move. My poor bottom..."

"Did you not think to sit on the toilet instead?" Luella asked.

That stopped him. "Um, no. You were sitting on it, I felt bad about pinching your seat." Harry confessed, blushing.

Luella couldn't help laughing. "Not while I was talking to Penny, I wasn't! You, Harry, are too gentlemanly by half. Still, it was rather sweet of you, I must admit."

Harry blushed again, although this time for rather different reasons. Luella decided to change the subject.

"So how are your legs now? Can you feel them yet?"

"I can feel them alright, but I wish I couldn't." Harry shook his right leg out, then his left, before looking up at Luella curiously. "That Penelope girl's your cousin, is she? I didn't know you had magical relatives."

"Nor did I until this Christmas. She's really my second cousin or something like that, our mothers were cousins. But her mum died when she was just a baby and her dad moved away so she never knew any of my family. Fortunately, her dad remarried Marlie Lovegood's aunt, and I ran into her at their Christmas party. We got chatting and I found out she's a distant cousin. Cool, eh?"

"Cool. How'd her mother die?"

"Same way yours did."

Harry's curiosity disappeared at once. "Oh! Poor girl. But her dad made it, did he?"

"Yeah, the Aurors got there in time. In fact, it was Deanna's mum, Caitlin. They took one look at her and legged it."

"Blimey. Is she really that frightening?"

"Oh yeah. Surely Hermione's told you her nickname, Caitlin the Cold-Blooded?"

"Well, yeah. But I thought everyone was exaggerating. Didn't know all the stories about how violent and ruthless she is were actually true." Something seemed to occur to Harry as he turned introspective. "Wish she'd got there in time when Voldemort went for my parents."

"Harry..." Luella reached out for him. He brushed her away.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm not upset or anything, just regretful. Can't miss what I never had after all." A grin began to creep across his face. "So this cousin of yours. Seeing Percy Weasley, is she?"

"It looks like it. Stop laughing! I expect he's a perfectly nice boy!"

"Lu, you're sounding just like your mother."

"You've never met my mother!"

"No, but I expect that's what she'd say about Percy if she met him."

"She would say nothing of the sort -" Luella began, but was pulled up short by the memory of what her mother would probably do if she ever met Percy and Penelope.

"Oh god." was all she could say. Harry didn't answer, just smiled innocently. "Stop looking at me like that!" she snapped at him. "Look, regardless of what our personal opinions might be, Penny likes him. And as long as my cousin is happy, that's all that matters. Got it?"

"Yes, Lu." Harry nodded. "So, do you reckon I should tell Ron then? He'd have a field day with this, not to mention what the twins would do."

"Harry!" Luella's tone of voice made it quite clear that there was to be no argument on this topic. "Breathe one word of this to anyone, anyone at all, and I will personally use Polyjuice Potion on Deanna and myself, infiltrate Gryffindor Tower and leave a rather unpleasant surprise waiting for you in your dorm. I am not having my cousin upset just because you want to make Percy's life a misery. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry stopped smirking at once. "OK, OK. Not a word. Promise. Besides, it's not that funny, really. I just think it's a bit rich for him to tell me and Ron off for going in here, then using the place as a private rendezvous spot to meet his girlfriend in, that's all."

"It was Penny's idea." Luella reminded him.

"Suppose it was. In that case, I hope he appreciated the irony of it all." Harry looked around him at the dingy surroundings. "God, this place is depressing. Let's get out of here."

"Couldn't agree with you more, Harry. Come on." Luella headed for the door, profoundly relieved that Harry seemed to have forgotten all about the Heir of Slytherin.

Harry made to follow her. However, he stopped short, his attention caught by a small black object lying on the floor. He picked it up. It proved to be a little black book.

"Hey, Lu!" he called to her. "Is this yours?"

Luella turned round. "What is it?"

"It's a book. Muggle diary from the look of it."

"Not mine. Don't have one, and if I did, it'd be under lock, key, and the strongest security hexes in existence in my dorm. What's in it, anything interesting?"

Harry flicked through the pages. "Not a thing, it's completely blank."

"Oh." Luella lost interest, and in doing so, made what probably ranked as the biggest mistake she'd make that year. "You may as well keep it then, Harry. See ya later."

She left the room and walked away towards the library. Harry followed her out and made for the Gryffindor common room, still examining his new find. It was then that he noticed something odd about it. It had been lying in a puddle when he'd picked it up, and the covers were soaked through. The actual pages though, were completely unharmed. They didn't even look as if they'd ever been wet. And yet the book had been half submerged. Odd indeed, especially for a Muggle book. Deciding that this merited further investigation, he tucked the book into his pocket and hurried off.

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Chapter Seventeen Calculated Risks

"Well? Did you find anything out?" asked Ron as Harry slipped into their dorm, noiselessly closing the door behind him. That was something Ron had never understood about Harry, how he could move so quietly, just be so unobtrusive all the time. If Ron had had Harry's fame, he'd be advertising it at every opportunity. No sense simply opening a door when you could get away with kicking it open and striding in shouting "Bow before me, mortals!", after all. Harry, on the other hand, moved almost like a Slytherin. If Harry hadn't been his friend, Ron would have mistrusted his every move, however as it was, he just accepted it. Harry had never had to fight six siblings for attention after all.

"Maybe. There anyone else around?" He looked around, scanning the room in yet another mannerism that was just a little too Slytherin for Ron's liking.

"No, you're safe. Neville was here earlier, but I managed to get him to leave by hiding Trevor and persuading him to go and look for him. He'll be gone for a while, I think. So. What'd you find out then?" Ron settled down on Harry's bed, folding his legs into a Lotus position.

Harry joined him, face flushed with excitement now he knew he wasn't going to be overheard.

"A lot. Luella told me exactly what the Heir of Slytherin legend was. Binns was right about the first heir - he'll be Salazar's descendant, trying to wipe out all the Muggle-borns."

"Harry, I gathered that much. But what's all this about a Second Heir? Why would Salazar need two?"

Harry just smiled in enigmatic superiority. "That's what I said. And of course, he doesn't need two."

Ron frowned, his forehead crinkling in confusion. "So whose Heir is the Second Heir then?"

"Ah-ha! That's the clever bit. See, Salazar Slytherin had kids."

Ron screwed up his face in disgust. "Argh! That's horrible! Who on earth would want to shag him?"

"Ron, stop making a fuss. Someone had to or else there'd be no heirs at all."

"That's a bad thing how?"

"A bad thing in that the Second Heir's one of the good guys. See, Salazar had a daughter called Morgan."

Something clicked in Ron's mind. "Hang on. She wasn't a Tal-y-Rhys, was she?"

"Yeah, that's right. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin. Why?" Harry looked at Ron curiously.

"Because they're a bad lot, Harry," said Ron, troubled. "They were Dark witches. Apparently they used to do all sorts of horrible things, like abducting innocent young men and completely brainwashing them so they'd forget their families and communities. They were so good at it that men would actually say that they preferred living with the Tal-y-Rhys to living with their own families and refuse to come back. Then they'd drain them of their life force and when they'd finished, kick them out and leave them, a barren lifeless husk. And if any of their daughters got pregnant, they'd make them drink these poisonous potions that'd make them lose the baby. Mum reckons they used make their sons work for them as slaves, that's if they didn't sacrifice them at birth. And if you fell in love with a Tal-y-Rhys witch, they'd never let you marry her or anything. You'd have to go and live with them, and they'd make you do all the chores and everything. Then there's what they'd do to women."

"Why, what did they do to women?" asked Harry, intrigued despite a nagging intuition that there was more to this than met the eye.

"They used to get their male slaves to seduce them and entice them away from their husbands and children. They'd never be seen again. Occasionally, war parties did manage to capture them and bring them back, but by then it'd be too late. They'd have been brainwashed so thoroughly that they'd actually cry and scream when their captors got executed, and they'd practically have to be forced to go back home. And... and sometimes Harry, and this is the really awful bit, they used to get their women to seduce" and here Ron gulped before continuing, "*other women*." He shuddered. "Horrible. So many young women and girls with their whole lives ahead of them, traumatised by those bastards. The Tal-y-Rhys ruined lives, Harry. Thank the gods there's none left now. They all got executed back in the Middle Ages. There's rumours that a few remnants still survive, but the Ministry reckons it put paid to them all years ago. Good thing too, Mum reckons. She says they were all a bunch of young hussies and if they ever tried to return she'd give them what-for. She doesn't say it, but they were mostly Slytherin too. She reckons that a lot of Slytherins would love the Tal-y-Rhys to come back, those that don't back Malfoy anyhow. Especially Slytherin women. They've not had a decent opportunity to gain power since the Tal-y-Rhys witch trials." Ron lowered his voice. "That's why I'm so worried about Ginny. The Tal-y-Rhys may be gone, but there's plenty of Slytherins out there who know their magical techniques, or some of them anyway. I'm really worried they might start

brainwashing her, that's if they haven't already. You heard her this morning. She said that being Slytherin was the best thing that had ever happened to her. That it had *set her free*. What's happening, Harry? What are they doing to my sister?" Ron stared helplessly at him, eyes begging for an answer, for some meaning to it all. Unfortunately, if he'd been hoping for one from Harry, he was to be disappointed.

"Helping her settle in, it seems. I don't think I've ever seen her so in control. And if you're hoping the Tal-y-Rhys stay dead and buried, you're in for a nasty shock." Harry took a deep breath before staring him straight in the eye. "They're the only ones who can defeat the Heir of Salazar. See, Morgan wasn't evil like her father. When she heard what he'd done, she tried to undo the magic. But it was too strong even for her. So she added magic of her own to the Chamber of Secrets, and made a prophecy that fifty years after the first heir had come, there would be a second, descended from her, who would take on the first and defeat him. And she'd bring about peace between the houses, heal the wounds of magical society and restore Slytherin House to glory. She's one of the good guys, Ron. And she's the only one who can defeat the other heir, do you see? We've got to find her and help her, that's the only way of stopping the attacks. Are you with me, Ron?"

Ron didn't answer. He just stared numbly at Harry. "My god." he whispered. "Don't tell me they've got you too."

"RON!" Harry yelled at him, jerking the other boy out of his shock. "Luella did not brainwash me! Good god, Ron, what is it with you and Slytherins? You seem to think they're all out to take over the world and stab you in the back."

"Well... aren't they?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"No!" snapped Harry. He paused, recalling most of the Slytherins he knew. "Well, not all of them, anyway. Look, anyway, it doesn't matter. Point is, we need to find out who the Second Heir is, because she's the only one who can stop the attacks. And I am going to do it, Ron. With or without you. Now are you with me or not?" The penetrating look in his eyes reminded Ron of Snape. The boy shivered nervously.

"OK, OK, I'm with you. But if this Second Heir turns out to be dodgy, I'm out of here, OK? Now, did Luella say who it was?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I asked her but got interrupted before she could reply. I think she might know, though."

"Why's that?"

"Because we're not the only ones trying to find the Second Heir. Luella admitted that there was a whole group of people all trying to find her and help her succeed in her mission, and she's one of them. But she didn't say who it was. Maybe she's been sworn to secrecy."

"Maybe." said Ron thoughtfully, another idea beginning to form. "Or maybe not. Anything else?"

"There was one thing. Take a look at this." Harry produced the diary he'd found. Ron took one look and backed away in horror.

"What the hell is that??" he gasped.

"A book. Ron, stop freaking out. It's just someone's diary."

Ron calmed down a little but was not reassured. "Harry, there's some very dangerous books out there. You should see some of the ones Dad's confiscated. There was one that'd burn your eyes out if you tried to read it, and another one disguised as a series of harmless children's books that turned you into a hopeless obsessive, unable to do anything except contemplate various different combinations of characters going out with each other, and then there was this one that looked just like a Muggle newspaper, which if you read it for long enough made you really believe that there were hordes of asylum seekers and immigrants trying to invade the country and steal your job, defraud the benefits system and shag your daughters."

"Ron, that's the *Daily Mail*. It really is a Muggle newspaper."

"It is?" Ron blinked in surprise. "Oh. Never mind. And then right, there was this one by some witch from Surrey, Matthews I think her name was, that you could *never stop reading*. You'd have to carry it around with you for the rest of your life, doing everything one-handed, only able to see out of the corner of your eyes. And..."

"Ron!" Fascinating as this lurid description of all the dangerous books that Mr. Weasley had ever confiscated was, Harry did have other things he wanted to discuss. "Can we get back to the point, please? There doesn't seem to be anything too bad about it. It's a perfectly normal looking Muggle diary."

"Oh. Right." The implications of this suddenly sunk in. "A diary, eh? Whose is it?" Ron leaned forward, hoping it belonged to one of the Slytherins.

"Belongs to a T. M. Riddle."

"T. M. Riddle?" said Ron, sharply.

"That's right. You know him?"

"Not exactly. But I know the name. Remember that detention we had to do at the beginning of term? Filch had me scrubbing all those trophies. Well, one of them was his. Riddle's. Got an Award for Special Services to the School. I remember because I belched slugs all over it and had to clean it twice. Took ages." Ron shivered at the memory.

"What did he get an award for?" Harry asked, all ears.

"Don't know. Didn't say. Just said Award for Special Services to Hogwarts, presented 1943 to Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"1943?" Harry gasped. He reached out and took Ron by the shoulders. "Ron, are you absolutely sure it was 1943?"

"Course I'm sure, if you'd spent half an hour scrubbing the bloody thing, you'd remember every single detail too." snapped Ron. "Yes, it's absolutely, positively, definitely, without a doubt 1943. Why do you ask?"

"Because," Harry whispered, "it's 1993 right now. Fifty years after Riddle got his award. Fifty years ago, Ron!"

Ron, contrary to popular belief, was not as clueless as is often thought. The penny dropped immediately.

"When the Chamber was opened first time around. Oh!" Ron's eyes widened. "So Riddle was here then! He might know something about it! Harry, open the diary, what's it say?"

Harry smiled a very tight-lipped smile as he showed Ron the diary. "Bad luck, mate. Nothing in it. It's a 1943 diary alright, but it's completely blank."

"Oh." Ron deflated, flicking through the diary's unmarked pages. Frustrated, he passed the diary back to Harry. "Never mind. Maybe we'll find another lead somehow."

Harry took it back. "Still, don't you think it's just a little odd that a 1943 diary belonging to someone who got a Special Award that very year just happens to turn up when the trouble starts all over again?"

"Well yeah, I guess. But if it's blank, I don't see how it helps us."

Harry tapped the book. "It looks blank. But I can't help feeling there's more to it than meets the eye. I can't help feeling that Riddle's important. I mean, Special Awards aren't given out for no reason, are they? You've got to do something pretty outstanding to get one. So what if Riddle got his for catching the first heir, or at least stopping him from carrying out any more attacks?"

"It's certainly possible. But Harry, you're forgetting one thing. Riddle's not here, is he? And we don't know where to find him. He could be dead for all we know. All we have is this diary, and it's not exactly giving its secrets away, is it?" He indicated the book with one dismissive flick of his wrist.

Harry refused to let the matter drop. "That doesn't mean there's none to be found. I'm not giving up on it, Ron. Come on, let's go find Hermione. She might have an idea about it."

"And if she hasn't?" Ron did not sound hopeful.

"If she hasn't, then we'll try the library, see if we can find out anything about Tom Riddle. It might give us something to go on, at any rate. Come on, let's go." He got up to leave.

"I hope you're right, Harry." sighed Ron as he followed him out. "I hope you're right."

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For a place intended for study and learning, Hogwarts Library on a Saturday morning was surprisingly busy. Madam Pince had the day off, and a couple of bored junior librarians were running the show instead. This much Luella had gathered from the noise. Students from all houses tended to use the library as a meeting place and social gathering point with students of other houses, and authority's absence meant that there wasn't actually a lot in the way of work getting done.

Most of the noise seemed to be emanating from a big table in the centre. Luella wasn't surprised in the slightest to see Marlie sitting there fretting over a blank piece of parchment, with Rianne sitting next to her, idly filing her nails and studying a pink newspaper that, if Luella hadn't known better, she would have sworn was the *Financial Times*. On Marlie's other side, Deanna was taking notes from one of the textbooks her mother had bought her, presumably acquiring some knowledge that would actually prove helpful one day. Also seated at this table were the Clearwater twins working on some designs that were almost certainly not on the Hogwarts curriculum, Ginny and her friends doing the crossword in *Teen Witch*, and to Luella's surprise, Hermione Granger, frantically poring over a Transfiguration tome, looking perfectly normal and apparently fur-free.

"Hermione?" Luella took the empty seat in between her and Deanna.

"Yes?" The Gryffindor did not look up.

"What are you doing here?"

"Studying, what else would I be doing in a library?" Hermione answered, somewhat testily.

"But... Harry told me... I mean, I thought you were... Aren't you meant to be in the hospital wing?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"I was. But I was so worried about missing something important that Madam Pomfrey decided to let me out early. Good thing she did, I'm so behind!" Hermione began nibbling one of her fingernails. "I only hope I can catch up in time."

"I shouldn't think that'd be a problem." Luella took a look at the material Hermione was working on. While she knew it well enough, it was fairly advanced for someone halfway through their second year. "You look like you're doing well enough."

"I know, I know." sighed Hermione. "But it's important! It might come up in the exams, and if I don't know it now, I'm going to have real problems when I come to do my revision!"

Assiduous in her studies as Luella was, even she hadn't begun to think about exams yet, and the thought disturbed her. Time for a change of subject.

"So how'd you end up in the hospital wing anyway? Harry mentioned something about a potion gone wrong."

"Oh, the potion was fine. I just used the wrong kind of hair with it and ended up changing into a cat. I've still got some fur on my arms and back, although thankfully most of it's gone now. Madam Pomfrey reckons I'll be alright though, just as long as I keep taking the potion she gave me. I should be fine in a week or so. I'd be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone though. It's a bit embarrassing."

"I won't say a word." Luella promised. "Still, it'll teach you not to go messing around with shapeshifting potions in an attempt to spy on other houses, won't it?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You know about that? Oh my. Oh, Lu. I'm so sorry!" She looked guiltily away.

"Of course I know. Deanna and Ri knew about your potion anyway, and it didn't take them long to work out what it was for. Especially when they saw it in use. You have to get up pretty early to fool Rianne, you know. Don't worry," she reassured her, "I'm too impressed to be angry. Especially now Harry's told me why you did it. You should have asked us for help! We've had experience at that sort of thing, you know."

"I didn't think of that." Hermione admitted. "Besides, I wanted a challenge, you know? I wanted an adventure."

"Figures. Typical Gryffindor." Luella smiled knowingly.

"Who is?" asked Deanna, still engrossed in *Hexing and Counter-Hexing: Intermediate Level*. "Hermione." Luella told her. That caused Deanna to put the book down immediately.

"*Hermione*? What, Granger? Since when has she taken up extreme sports and downing pints in one?" She turned to look at Hermione. "You don't look any different."

"Hermione wanted an adventure, so instead of taking the sensible option and asking for our help in entrapping Malfoy, she does it the hard way and brews up a potion so they can impersonate Slytherins and do it themselves. No doubt breaking half a dozen school rules in the process." Luella explained.

"Oh, so it *was* you!" Deanna laughed. "We thought it might be. Why were you doing it anyway? Gryffindor you might be, but even so, you're hardly the type to go to all that trouble for no reason."

"Spying." said Hermione mysteriously.

"On who?" Deanna asked, curious. Hermione looked around before replying. She beckoned both girls towards her and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"On Malfoy."

"Oh." A pause. "Why?"

"We thought he might be..." Hermione looked around again. "We thought he might be the Heir of Slytherin!"

At those words, Deanna's curiosity vanished as the familiar Slytherin poker-face slammed down across her features.

"I see. Did you get anywhere?" Her voice sounded perfectly innocent to an outside observer, however Luella recognised it at once as her interrogation mode.

Hermione didn't appear to notice anything unusual.

"No. It's not Malfoy anyway. All we got were a load of old legends. Absolutely nothing of any use whatsoever. All that effort for nothing." she sighed.

"Never mind." Deanna consoled her, trying to hide her relief that Luella hadn't been implicated in any way. "It was worth a try. How did you do it anyway? That must have taken some planning."

"Yeah, how did you manage it?" Luella asked, intrigued. "You don't find recipes like that just anywhere."

Hermione once more leaned forward conspiratorially, although this time she couldn't resist a little bragging.

"Well, it was easy really. Lockhart signed the book out of the Restricted Section for us, and I stole the ingredients out of Snape's office."

"You did?" Deanna and Luella both stared at her before exchanging approving looks.

"Blimey. I didn't know you had it in you." commented Luella.

"Yeah, we're impressed. How?"

"I got Harry and Ron to cause a diversion. Harry threw one of Fred and George's fireworks into Goyle's potion. During the resulting chaos, I was able to sneak into his office and grab what we needed." Hermione shook her mane of hair, in a manner that could only be described as cocky. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Damn good." Luella nodded. "You know, that's almost Slytherin in its brilliance." She turned to Deanna. "Why have we never done anything like that?"

"Never had a reason to." Deanna reached for her quill and a piece of parchment. "So, Hermione. Talk me through this again. Firework, potion of unsuspecting stooge, chaos, raid Snape's stuff. That right?"

"That's it." Hermione's bravado turned to disapproval. "Deanna, I hope you're not thinking of using all this for your own twisted entertainment."

"Me? Never." said Deanna, a very picture of innocence. "And you got the book out of the library by lying to Lockhart, yes?"

"I didn't lie to him!" Hermione protested. She noticed the disbelieving looks the two Slytherins were giving her. "Well, maybe I stretched the truth just a little bit." she admitted, shamefaced.

Deanna returned to her note-taking. "Permission slip signed by Lockhart. OK. Difficult was it?"

"No, not really. He barely looked at the slip. I just said I needed it for background reading so I could understand something in one of his books and he signed it straight away. It wasn't hard at all."

"I see." Deanna began scribbling again. "Lockhart will sign virtually anything, especially if charm, flattery and general sucking up are employed. Honesty and sincerity not required, and you cannot overdo the crawling. Got it."

"Deanna, why are you taking all these notes?" Luella asked, peering over her shoulder. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing. But they might come in useful one day." Deanna turned to Marlie. "Hey, Marls. The Restricted Section's ours. Lockhart'll sign anything."

"He gets a lot of autograph requests, Deanna, he has to be flexible in these matters." said Marlie distractedly, still staring ferociously at her as yet untouched parchment. Suddenly it seemed to register with her just what Deanna was getting at. "The Restricted Section, did you say?"

"That's right. The Restricted Section we're barred from. I know how we can get in."

"Really?" Marlie laid down her quill. "How?"

"Simple. In fact, I can't believe I never thought of it before. We ask Lockhart to sign us in. He doesn't know we're banned, and it's the easiest thing in the world to get round him. What do you think?"

Marlie was temporarily rendered speechless. She shook her head in amazement. "That... that's brilliant! Absolutely amazing!" She reached for a piece of parchment, scribbled a note, folded it into a paper aeroplane and sent it flying over to land in front of Rachel Clearwater. The Ravenclaw picked it up and examined it carefully, before giving Marlie a dubious look. However, she opened it and began to read. As she did so, her eyes widened and a gasp of triumph escaped her lips. Nudging her brother in the side, she showed him the note. He read it once, displaying no emotion other than to raise an eyebrow. Looking over to his cousin, he nodded once and set fire to the note with an Incendio Charm before he and his sister returned to their work. Marlie smiled in satisfaction before resuming staring at her blank piece of parchment.

"Would someone like to tell me what that was about?" Rianne asked, looking up from what Luella realised with a shock really was a copy of the *Financial Times*. "We've

found out how to get into the Restricted Section." Deanna explained. "If you bullshit Lockhart sufficiently, you're in. Easy. Hermione managed it and she's a hopeless liar."

"Really?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Who would have thought it? Lockhart does have a use after all."

"Rianne!" snapped Marlie. "I told you before, stop making fun of him!"

Rianne rolled her eyes. "Marls, that would sound just a bit more genuine if you hadn't been plotting with your cousins to take advantage of his stupidity in order to gain illicit access to the Restricted Section. And don't deny it, I was reading that note over your shoulder. Your exact words were, and I quote, *I can get us into the R.S. Looks like the Project's back on. Burn this letter. Marls*. What the Project is, I have no idea, but it clearly involves something underhand."

Marlie shifted uneasily. "It isn't! It's just going to involve a fair bit of looking at esoteric tomes, that's all."

"Which just so happen to have lots of curses and dark hexes in them." Rianne pointed out.

"She doesn't need the Restricted Section for that." Deanna indicated the book she'd been reading. "You should check out this book Mum gave me, it's got all sorts of creative ways to make someone suffer."

"Has it now?" Rianne seemed intrigued. "Does it have ways of making it look like an accident too?"

"I think that's the Advanced one."

"Shame. I was thinking maybe we could test them on Lockhart."

"Rianne!" Marlie yelled.

"Alright, alright! I'll stop teasing your precious Gilderoy. Speaking of which, that assignment isn't going to write itself. Hurry up, it's due in Monday and I'm going to need Sunday night with Lu's Dicta-Quill transcribing it."

"I'm trying!" snapped Marlie. "It's not my fault all my creativity went into my forty verse epic saga about Lockhart's defeat of the Killer Boggarts of Bridlington."

"Oh god, you don't mean to tell me you actually bothered writing that one!" said Deanna dismissively. "I couldn't be arsed myself. Right waste of time and he never checks to see who's done their homework anyway. Did you do yours, Lu?"

"I did. Mine was but a humble limerick. I struggled heroically with it for days, then one night, I achieved a breakthrough on realising that Boggart was a pretty good rhyme with Lockhart. All just flowed from there really."

"A limerick?!" Marlie stared in disbelief. "Lu, it's meant to be high poetry, not a crap rhyme! It's meant to be art!"

"Now, now. If you look carefully at the title of the assignment, all he said was to write a poem on his defeat of the Bridlington Boggarts. He never said what sort, did he, Deanna?"

"He didn't say a word on the subject."

"Exactly. A limerick is a poem, is it not?"

"Yes, but..." Marlie tried desperately to search for the valid reason that surely explained why a limerick didn't fulfil the requirements of the assignment, but couldn't for the life of her think of one.

"I rest my case." Luella leaned back, satisfied.

"There you go then, Marls." Deanna advised her. "Do a short one. How about a sonnet? They're short."

"Or a cinquaine." Rianne added. "They're really short."

"He'll think I'm slacking!" moaned Marlie.

"Hey, it's my name going on this, remember! And like Deanna said, he never bothers to keep a record of the marks, so I'm in the clear anyway."

Marlie slammed her quill down. "If that's the case, why are you making me do your homework for you?"

"I like seeing you suffer." Rianne grinned.

"Sadist. However, you have done me one favour. You have removed any obligation I might have had to put any effort into this. Right, Lu. Shortest form of poetry possible, please."

"That'd have to be the haiku. Three lines. Seventeen syllables. No probs."

"A haiku?!" Rianne exploded. "You are not submitting a bloody haiku!!"

"Why on earth not?" Marlie blinked in surprise before assuming her most charming smile. "It's an ancient and venerable Japanese art form. You're not dissing the Japanese are you?"

"No." Rianne muttered.

"Well then." Marlie picked up her quill and set to work. "OK, how's this. Great wizard hero/ faced by his ultimate fear./ He had no problems."

Deanna counted the syllables. "Hey, it fits as well! Yeah, go for that."

"I will." Marlie scribbled the haiku down and passed the parchment to Rianne. "There you go. One assignment, all ready for you to transcribe."

Rianne looked at it. "Pitiful. Just pitiful. Lu, you needn't worry about lending me your Dicta-Quill. I can have this done myself in five minutes."

"It must be nice having a quill that writes your essays for you." Marlie observed. "Any chance of me having one?"

"Too late." Luella replied. "You've just missed Christmas and your birthday's eleven months away. Anyway, it only writes what you tell it to. You still have to do the work."

"Oh." said Marlie, deflated. However, true to form, it didn't last long. "Lu, I don't suppose there's any way it could be, you know, tweaked, is there? So as to put together an essay all by itself with you just reading out the relevant facts thus saving an awful lot of work."

"I don't think so, Marls."

"Of course you can't, Marls." said Rianne, returning her attention to her *FT*. "It's only a Dicta-Quill. It doesn't have any intelligence of its own. You're talking about something a lot more complicated here. Why, you'd need a Quick-Quotes Quill for that."

"A Quick-Quotes Quill?" Luella asked, bewildered.

"Journalists use them for writing their stories." Deanna told her. "Just feed in the basic facts and it'll produce the perfect tabloid story for you. Cost a fortune though, twenty Galleons or so."

Marlie sighed in despair. "Not even I have that much. Not to spare anyhow. Yes, Malfoy finally paid his debts off, yes I just got a load of other instalments and back payments from half the house, but it's all got to go back into the business, most of it. And the Sweepstake doesn't bring in that much. Damn it, I almost got out of Rianne's Lockhart homework there!"

"Shame." said Rianne. "I would have liked to have seen Lockhart stitched up."

"And me." volunteered Deanna. "Oh, if only we could think of a way to raise twenty Galleons in a hurry!"

"Not much chance of that." sighed Luella. "You'd have to borrow money off half the house to raise that much..." Her voice trailed off as an idea came to her. Looking at her friends, she realised that much the same thought had occurred to them. With one polished move, all four of them put their heads together and began plotting.

"We'll form a Syndicate." said Rianne softly. "Consisting of everyone we can lay hands on. Everyone puts some money into the communal pot, and when we have enough we order a quill."

"Obviously, we'll need a rota." murmured Deanna. "Can't have fights over it after all. But we should be able to make sure everyone gets a fair go."

"And for a small charge, we could let non-Syndicate members have a go too!" breathed Marlie. "Thus making a nice little second income for us all! Or fourth, in my case."

"And once we'd made enough profit out of it, we could invest in another quill, allowing us to hire it out to several people at a time. Or keep one for Syndicate use and one for non-members." mused Luella.

"Of course, we'll have to limit membership." said Rianne. "Or we'll end up paying out far more money than we're getting in. Plus it means we won't have to pay out so much in dividends."

"We should probably arrange for weekly payouts." Deanna suggested. "We take all the money we've made each week, put half in the communal funds and split the rest between Syndicate members. Before long, we'll have made quite a nice little profit!"

"But even if we don't," grinned Luella, "we will be getting our homework in Defence Against the Dark Arts done and thus have a lot more time to ourselves. And we get to wind up Lockhart, which is something worth paying for, I think."

"All we need now is Syndicate members." said Marlie thoughtfully. "Plus someone to do the accounting. Someone good with numbers. Someone reliable. Someone we can trust. Someone relatively neutral and not a Slytherin."

"And who do you suggest?" asked Deanna.

Marlie just smiled. "I know just the man. Hey! Pauly!" she called across the table. Her cousin looked up.

"What?"

"Come here. I've got a proposition to put to you."

Intrigued, Paul Clearwater got to his feet. Rachel, sensing a good business opportunity when she heard it, followed him over.

"Pauly, you're good with numbers aren't you?" purred Marlie.

Paul exchanged looks with his sister. "Yes." he said, on guard.

"Well, I'm launching a new business and I was wondering if you could do the accounts for us. Seeing as quite a few people will be investing and all, we need a honest, reliable and above all, neutral person to do it."

"And you picked me. How thoughtful. Although I can quite see how you might have trouble finding someone honest and trustworthy in your house." Paul pulled up a seat

in one fluid movement, apparently interested despite the sarcasm. "So what's involved and what do I get out of this?"

"A share of the profits." Marlie promised him. "Listen, this is what we're planning." She filled him and Rachel in on their new venture. Both twins listened in awe.

"I want in." said Rachel as soon as Marlie had finished. "How much do you want?"

"Erm..." Marlie turned to Rianne. "How much should we charge?"

"Galleon each as a minimum. More if they've got it. We're trying to get twenty Galleons for our first quill, and we don't want too large a Syndicate."

The twins reached for their money bags, and before long, four Galleons were resting on the table.

"We're feeling generous." Rachel explained.

"Much obliged to you." said Deanna, reaching for parchment and quill. "Right, so that's the four of us, the Clearwater twins, who else should we ask?"

"I'm free, Tyler." came a familiar voice. Turning round, Deanna found herself face to face with Draco, flanked as usual by Crabbe and Goyle. And on the table behind was Pansy Parkinson with Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode, all looking very interested indeed.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped.

"Want? I want to know what you're planning now. Plus I was irresistibly drawn by the sweet sound of Galleons." Draco pulled up a chair. "What gives, Tyler?"

Deanna exchanged looks with her friends. "Should we tell him?"

"Don't see why not." said Rianne. "After all, he's got plenty of cash to invest and he's far less likely to shop us if he's implicated too. Sign them all up, we could do with the money."

"OK. But I'm not entirely happy about this." Deanna briefly explained what would be involved. All the second years seemed impressed.

"Ingenious." murmured Draco. "Getting my work done in half the time is worth the price on its own. But am I likely to see any of my money again?"

"Maybe. We're planning to hire it out to non-members and share out half the week's takings with all the members."

"I see. And how much would it cost to hire this quill of yours?"

Deanna turned to Rianne. "Well?"

"Three and ten a night?" Rianne turned to Paul for his opinion. He nodded his head in agreement.

"There you go then, Malfoy. Three and ten a night." said Deanna.

"As opposed to a Galleon to join." Draco turned to Pansy. "Sound good to you?"

"Too right!" she laughed. "Put my name down."

"And ours!" cried Blaise and Millicent.

"Let's see your money then." Deanna was answered with three golden coins and what proved to be another two Galleons in Sickles. Blaise just shrugged.

"I had some change to get rid of. What?"

"Nothing, Blaise, nothing." sighed Deanna. "Anyone got a moneybag?"

Marlie produced some blotting paper and her wand. One tap later and a spare moneybag was on its way to Paul, busy counting up all the loose change. Meanwhile, Luella was adding Pansy, Millicent and Blaises' names to the list of members.

"Hey, that's nine in as many minutes. Not bad!" She looked up at Malfoy. "You three made your minds up yet?"

Goyle promptly thrust a handful of coins at her. Draco made a point of deliberately pausing before oh-so-casually letting a handful of Galleons fall onto the table.

Which just left Crabbe.

"Well?" Luella asked him. He didn't reply, just sneered at her. Luella guessed at once what he was thinking. The taboo word *Mudblood* hung tangibly in the air. But it wasn't the only one.

Pay up, you bastard. The Glamour was done before Luella even knew it. And before Crabbe fully registered what was going on, he'd dug into his pockets and presented her with no less than three Galleons. Luella took them with a smile and passed them to Paul.

"Thank you, Crabbe. Welcome to the Syndicate." She smiled with satisfaction as she watched him realise what he'd just done. Snarling with a rage that was no less dangerous for its impotence, he turned tail and stalked away.

"What's up with him?" Pansy asked, confused.

Draco shrugged. "Who knows. He'll change his tune when the profits start rolling in though. See you around, Tyler. Nice doing business with you." He inclined his head in the briefest of nods and left, followed by Goyle. Pansy and her friends, deciding that the excitement had passed, returned to doing their work.

"Now that was a lucrative ten minutes, wasn't it?" Deanna turned to Paul. "How much have we got?"

"Seventeen Galleons, once you four have contributed."

"Hey, that's not bad. We might even be able to close off the membership there. Best order the quill now, Marls."

Marlie opened her mouth to reply but found herself interrupted as Lydia Vetinari's strident tones echoed across the table.

"Oh no you don't! We heard every word of what you're planning, and we want a part of it!" The first year's eyes flashed dangerously, in a manner that clearly indicated that rejection was not an option.

"Yeah." chimed in Autumn. "Why should you guys have all the fun? Not to mention the profits. I hate doing Lockhart assignments. You have no idea how hard it is to think up synonyms for 'heroic' and 'wonderful' after a while."

"Oh believe me, Autumn, we do." said Rianne grimly.

"Like you'd know." came a dark mutter from Marlie's direction. Rianne just smiled to herself. Looked like Marlie was finally being cured of her Lockhart obsession. Work had a way of turning her off things. One day, Marlie would look back and see that it was for her own good. Well, maybe.

"Well, Rianne? Shall we recruit them?" Deanna was interrupting her train of thought.

"Go on then. We've still got room for a few more people."

"Right you are. Come on then, let's see your gold." Deanna held out her hand. Lydia and Autumn promptly paid up. Ginny, however, didn't move. She just sat there, biting her lip anxiously. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Come on then, Gin, pay up. What's the matter, don't you want to be in the Syndicate?" Autumn asked, amazed that Ginny still had scruples over this sort of thing after four months in Slytherin.

"It's not that." Ginny whispered. "It's just that..." She hung her head in shame, embarrassed that her Achilles heel was being so publicly needed. "I don't have a Galleon." There. It was done. The old shame at being poor was out in the open. Great, just what she needed. She'd join Slytherin to get away from it, and now here it was again, reminding her once more that she wasn't really on equal terms at all, just tagging along after the rich kids. Shoved out of the good life because she couldn't afford it. And just when she thought she was settling in. Trying not to cry, she braced herself for the inevitable snide comment from Lydia.

Which was why she got the shock of her life when Lydia actually did speak.

"No problem. I'll pay your share. Here, Deanna. One Galleon on Gin's behalf." She flipped another golden coin towards the fourth years.

"What? Lydia, you don't have to do that!" Ginny gasped.

"Yes I do. I'm not having you miss out on all the excitement just because your parents don't have any initiative of their own. You can pay me back when the dividends start rolling in."

"Oh!" Ginny was at a loss for words. "I... Thank you! But... Lydia... Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure!" The other girl smiled, green eyes flashing with kindness this time. "Don't feel bad about it. Lots of Slytherins have to borrow money initially. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"Thank you!" Ginny whispered. "How can I ever repay you?"

"In cash. When the first payout comes through." came the reply. Ginny felt her embarrassment melt away. After all, every businessmage had to borrow money to start off with. It was just a start-up loan, and she couldn't have wished for easier terms.

"I will. You can count on it." she promised.

However, not everyone at the table was so keen on the idea. Hermione was glaring at Luella in particular in a way that reminded her unnervingly of her mother. Luella felt herself tensing, expecting her mother's voice to ring out across the library, the dread words "Luella Angelica Martin, what have you done now?" forming their usual precursor to punishment. While Hermione did not actually say she disapproved, it wasn't a particularly difficult message to work out. Even the not normally that perceptive Deanna noticed.

"You alright there, Hermione? You look a bit upset. Anything the matter?"

"As a matter of fact there is." The iciness in Hermione's voice could have made a Slytherin wince, and did. "What do you think you're doing, cheating at your homework like that? And making money out of it too? I don't believe you lot, I really don't!" the Gryffindor fumed at them.

"It's not cheating!" Deanna protested. "It's just... getting some creative assistance with our work, that's all."

"Creative?" shrieked Hermione. "You're getting the quill to write all your assignments for you!"

"Not all of them." Rianne put in. "Just the pointless Lockhart ones."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "They're not pointless! They're very important! You could be missing out on some vital piece of anti-Dark Arts knowledge!"

"Not likely, not with my mother around." Deanna indicated the tome in front of her. "This book alone's got more hexes and counter-charms than everything we've learnt in the past four years. A couple of hours spent with this is more profitable than a whole year of Lockhart's lessons."

"But not as profitable as the Syndicate's going to be." Marlie added. This had the effect of rousing Hermione's anger even more than it already was.

"So not only do you have to indulge your own laziness, you have to drag everyone else into it as well? All just to line your own pockets! Disgusting!"

Marlie looked blankly at her. "Why? We're not ripping anyone off."

"That is not the point!" Hermione hissed. "It's wrong. You shouldn't be encouraging everyone to break the rules."

"Hey, we're just hiring it out. What they do with it afterwards is up to them." Rianne turned to Marlie. "You know, I think we just had an insight into why all the wealthiest magical families are Slytherin."

"Oh!" seethed Hermione. "I'm beginning to wonder if Ron isn't right about you lot. Especially you, Luella! I thought you of all people were better than that!"

Luella squirmed. "Well, yes, but I could do with the cash, and it is Lockhart after all."

"There you go again! Criticising Professor Lockhart, after all the hard work and dedication he puts into teaching us! Ron always picks on him too, everyone seems to! Well, I'm sick of it! And I'm putting a stop to this right now. I'm going to see Professor McGonagall and tell her exactly what you're up to." She got up and began to storm out of the library.

The four Slytherins looked at each other in horror. Their plan looked like it would be over before it had even begun.

Deanna turned to Luella. "Do something!" she whispered.

Easier said than done. Luella hadn't got a clue what to do. However, fortunately for her, Harry and Ron chose that precise moment to put in an entrance.

"There you are, Mione!" laughed Harry as he spotted her. "We thought we might find you here."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Hermione? In a library? Surely not." He turned back to her. "Good to see you presentable again, mate." He took in Hermione's livid appearance. "What's up?"

"Those four!" snapped Hermione. "They're planning this grand scheme to get their Defence Against the Dark Arts homework done for them and make money out of it at the same time."

"Really?" Both boys looked highly impressed. "Tell us more!"

It dawned on Luella how she could get Hermione to keep quiet. Bribery was out, but Hermione was the last person to get her friends in trouble. She made her way over.

"We're putting together a Syndicate. Everyone puts in a Galleon and when we have enough, we're buying an enchanted quill that will write our Lockhart assignments for us. We're going to hire it out to non-members too and split the proceeds between us. Want in? There's still spaces."

"You bet!" Harry reached for his money bag and produced a golden Galleon. "Sign me up right now!"

"Will do." Luella smiled. She turned to Ron. "What about you?"

Ron's enthusiasm had died as soon as Luella had mentioned the entry fee. "I think I'll pass, thanks."

Luella could have smacked herself. Of course. If Ginny needed to borrow money to join, Ron certainly would have to. She cursed herself for not having realised.

Harry had also guessed why the change of heart. "Hey Ron, I can pay your share if you like."

"It's alright, Harry. I don't need your charity." snapped Ron, trying and failing not to sound bitter.

Typical Gryffindor, thought Luella. Always taking pride in their poverty and refusing all aid. Honestly, it's just a business deal. Just a business deal...

"The Syndicate will loan you the money." said Luella, inspiration dawning. "We've got excess funds anyway, some of our members were quite generous. It's really quite amazing, as soon as we mentioned the prospect of profits and not having to do Lockhart homework, everyone seemed to just start flinging money at us. We'll take it out of your payouts. No interest either. Sound good?"

Ron gaped. "You'd really let me join for free?" His eyes narrowed. "Look, I don't want any special treatment, alright? I don't want you feeling sorry for me."

"You're not joining for free. You're borrowing off us. It's a business deal. Are you interested or not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am." said Ron, dazed. "Look, are you sure about this? Especially the no interest bit. I feel like I should work for it."

"Why? None of us are. That's kind of the idea, to get out of doing work. Why, do you want to pay interest?"

"No, no, not at all, that's quite alright." said Ron hastily.

"Good. That's settled then." Luella said briskly. She turned round and called to Deanna. "Deanna! Harry and Ron have joined."

"Nice one!" Deanna called back. "I'll add their names."

Hermione could only stare open-mouthed as Deanna scribbled on a piece of parchment that was obviously the members' list. She'd been well and truly outwitted. She could hardly go to McGonagall now, not with her two best friends implicated. They were on their last chance as it was, if they got in trouble again, they'd be expelled. There was absolutely nothing she could do except glare silently at Luella, who just smiled sweetly back at her.

"What about you, Hermione? Interested?"

"No." snapped Hermione. "I want no part in this." She turned to her friends. "You get involved if you have to. But don't come running to me when you get found out!" She flounced back to the table and sat down, burying her head in her books.

"She doesn't really approve." Luella explained. "Thinks we're going to be missing out on all sorts of vital anti-Dark Arts knowledge."

"The only thing we'll be missing out on is having to think up two words that rhyme with 'Gilderoy'." snorted Ron. "Tell you what, Harry, limericks are a damn sight harder than they look."

"You did limericks as well, did you?" laughed Luella. "Same here. Try rhyming 'Boggart' and 'Lockhart'."

"He did that last time." grinned Harry as the three of them made their way over to the table. "Now he's stuck for ideas. Tell you what, Lu, we may not be learning much about defending ourselves, but I'm discovering a new form of poetry every week, it's great!"

"Which is all very well until your back's against the wall." said Ron as he sat down next to Hermione. "Can't see very many Dark mages being put off by your ability to compose sonnets off the cuff."

"Oh I don't know." mused Luella. "If you offered to do one about them, they might take you on as their personal bard."

"Now there's a nice, safe lifestyle." commented Ron. "Your whole survival hinging on your ability to suck up to a certified evil git and make it rhyme too. I think learning how to hex is a better guarantee of survival than poetry, eh Harry? And talking of which, what is your mate Tyler reading?" He indicated Deanna's book.

"Her mum sent it to her. Wants her to learn something useful this year." Luella told him.

"Her *mum*???" Ron's jaw dropped in shock. "Sent her that? But that's practically a Dark arts manual. My mum wouldn't let any of us near a book like that!"

"Knowing Fred and George, I'm not surprised." said Harry.

"Well, Deanna's mother obviously has a higher opinion of her maturity than your mum has of yours." Luella said, just a little testily.

"Well, I just hope none of your housemates gets hold of it." said Ron nervously.
"Although knowing you lot, most of you probably have access to far worse. Like that thing Stormosi's got, with all those weird and esoteric tables on the back. Freaky. Gods know what that's intended for. Probably some demonic grimoire designed to smite your enemies and traffick with the denizens of hell."

"Ron," Harry pointed out. "it's the *Financial Times*. It's a perfectly normal Muggle newspaper and those tables are share prices." He blinked as this fact sunk in. "Erm, Lu, what's she doing with the *FT*?"

"An excellent point. Ri, what are you doing with the *FT*?" Luella had been wondering why Rianne had a copy all morning, and was dying to satisfy her curiosity.

"Tracking my share portfolio. What else would I be doing with a *Financial Times*?"

"Oh. Right." It took a few minutes for it to sink in. "Hang on. A share portfolio??"

"Yes." Rianne laid down her newspaper and looked up with a slightly condescending smile. "What? You never heard of a pure-blood playing the stock exchange before?"

Luella and Ron both shook their heads.

"No." said Luella. "Most of them think FT-SE's something you play on a first date."

"What's a stock exchange?" asked Ron, bewildered.

"A stock exchange, Weasley, is where you can buy a share in any listed business of your choice." Rianne explained. "In effect, you get to own part of it. Depending on how the business does, it will either increase or decrease in value. Should it become worth a lot more than what you paid for it, you can sell it and make a fortune. Which is what I'm going to attempt. It's really very interesting, Luella's dad told me all about it over the summer."

Ron blinked, dazed by all this information. "Riiight.... What happens if the business in question doesn't do very well?"

"The share price falls and you lose money."

"Oh. Sounds a bit risky to me. You could lose a fortune doing that."

"But you could also make one." smiled Rianne. "You have to take risks sometimes, Weasley. Surely a Gryffindor can understand that?"

"That's different!" Ron protested. "I don't know how, but it just is."

"Are you making anything out of it?" Harry asked.

"Enough. Let's just say I won't be relying on hand-outs from my relatives anymore."

The admission that there was money to be made out of this little venture seemed to rouse interest in the most unlikely of quarters. Both Deanna and Marlie dropped what they were doing and looked up.

"Won't you?" asked Marlie in surprise. "Blimey, has your dad won the pools or something?"

"Hardly. And no, no one's died and left me anything. I'm exploring the world of high finance."

"Oh." Marlie's enthusiasm died away. "That's not very interesting."

"It doesn't have to be." Rianne told her. "It's profitable. That's all that matters. Although I will admit that it does exert a certain fascination."

Marlie peered over her shoulder and stared at the tables before her. No matter how hard she tried, all she could make out were names and numbers more confusing than an Advanced Arithmancy text. Nothing really fascinating, nothing like the entrancing interplay of wires and circuits and electricity and colour co-ordinated fascias that went into designing a Walkmage.

"Just looks like numbers to me, Ri."

"Numbers, as you would know if you'd bothered taking Arithmancy, are the building blocks of the universe, Marlie. And these will make my fortune."

"Will they now." Deanna, by contrast, sounded intrigued. "Ri... I don't suppose... there's any chance... I mean, Mum set this Junior Gringotts account up for me with 100 Galleons in it, and..."

"You want to have a go, is that right?" sighed Rianne.

Deanna nodded. "Please?"

"Oh go on then. Pick a couple of companies out and I'll put some cash on for you."

"Yay! Thanks, Ri!" Deanna perused the listings and circled some names, before passing the paper back to Rianne. The Slytherin took one look and raised an eyebrow.

"You sure about that, Deanna?"

"Yes. Why, shouldn't I be?" Deanna asked, a little wary. "They're good companies, aren't they?"

"Well, yes, but I just have a bad feeling about them, that's all."

"You worry too much, Ri. Fifty Galleons on each please."

Rianne just looked at her friend. "You're willing to risk your entire savings?"

"Why not? After all there's money to be made here!"

"There's also a lot to be lost, Deanna." Rianne reminded her. "Tell you what, I'll put twenty each, and if all goes well, you can put invest some more. Deal?"

"Deal!" Deanna produced her Junior Gringotts chequebook and wrote Rianne a cheque for forty Galleons. Rianne took it from her and calmly pocketed it.

Ron could only watch in jealousy. "Wish I had a Junior Gringotts account." he muttered.

"Never mind, Weasley." said Rianne. "Maybe your dad'll come into some money and get you one one of these days."

"Doubt it." sighed Ron. "Whatever he gets won't go very far between seven of us. Besides, Mum reckons that only spoilt rich kids need Junior Gringotts accounts."

"Bet Malfoy's got one." said Harry, trying to cheer Ron up.

"He has." Ginny piped up. "In fact, not only has he got a Junior Gringotts account, I think he's got his own Gringotts card."

"A Gringotts card?" Deanna shrieked. "How'd he get that?? My mum won't let me anywhere near one. Reckons I'd run up debts."

"Or gamble it on the FT-SE." Luella observed. Deanna ignored her.

"Bloody hell, a Gringotts card, can you believe it?" she muttered. "His dad spoils him rotten. Can you believe it? Wonder what his credit limit is."

"Too much." Ron sulked. "Git." He turned back to Rianne. "So, this footsie thing..."

"FT-SE." Rianne corrected. "Stands for Financial Times Stock Exchange. What about it?"

"Whatever." Ron shrugged. "How do you go about investing?"

"Well, my dad's Squib cousin Luciano Stormosi works in the City, and he puts the money on for me. Why, you thinking of having a go?"

"Maybe." muttered Ron.

Rianne just laughed. "Weasley, you've got to have some money to invest before you can start. And it's not something you can get loans for, y'know?"

"How'd you get yours then?" snapped Ron. "And don't tell me you've got a trust fund - your dad's on the same salary as mine."

"Dad won a not inconsiderable amount on the dogs, and seeing as I suggested the winner to him, he let me have half. That's how, Weasley."

"The dogs?" Ron sneered. "Blimey, Stormosi, are your entire family incurable gamblers?"

"No." snapped Rianne. "It was a one-off. Just now and then my dad likes a bit of a flutter. Can we drop it?" Please, she thought. Before the truth behind the words 'now and then' and 'a bit of a flutter' got exposed for what they were. It had been a one-off though. For her anyway. Long gone were the days when her father had taken her along to race courses and casinos as his 'lucky mascot'. Of course, also long gone were the days when there'd been money to burn, but even Rianne had principles. Don't think about it, she told herself. In the past now, except when she needed cash in a hurry of course. Ignoring the protestations of what passed for a conscience, she got to her feet, grateful for the sound of the lunch bell.

"Come on." she said roughly, gathering up her things. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

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Chapter Eighteen Big Pink Balloons and a Troupe of Performing Midgets

"So how long have you been wheeling and dealing in the world of high finance then, Ri?" Deanna asked as they made their way towards the Great Hall. Ginny, Lydia and Autumn had already disappeared, as had the Clearwaters, who were even now discussing the possibility of playing the stock market themselves and using Arithmantical formulae to improve their chances. Harry and Ron were also well ahead now, although Hermione was hanging back, clearly not having forgiven them for betraying Lockhart yet.

"Since October." Rianne replied. "I mean, Luella's dad told me all about it after he found me puzzling over his *Financial Times* during the summer. And I sort of had an idea that I could make money out of this. So, after talking my dad into winning some money for me, I had a word with Cousin Luce who was so stunned at my audacity he agreed to invest it for me. And it's done so well he's decided to stick with it. I'm letting him take a cut, naturally."

"Naturally." mused Deanna. "But Ri, you don't mind me asking just one question, right? Share prices can go down as well as up, right?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

"So... how have you managed to make rather a lot of money out of it? Have you lost any? And then there's the gambling in order to raise the capital. How do you do it?"

Rianne just shrugged. "I'm just lucky I guess. Although the stock market investments were made on the basis of a long and careful assessment of market trends, company performance and intuition."

Deanna, apparently pacified, said no more on the subject. However, Luella couldn't help noticing a certain look in Rianne's eyes, as if there were a little more to it than that. She didn't get the chance to mention it though. Marlie was speaking now.

"I still think you're a jammy git, Stormosi. Very cunning though. You must be Machiavelli reincarnate." Envious though she was, Marlie was impressed enough not to be bothered by it.

Luella was reminded why she'd sought Deanna out that morning in the first place. "So you guys really believe in reincarnation then."

"Oh yeah." Marlie nodded. "Mum wouldn't lie to me about that. She reckons that's why we have Muggle-borns - they're mage souls born to Muggle families, although apparently Muggle souls can become mages over time. Don't know how though."

"Development of psychic abilities, right-brain thinking, an ascetic lifestyle and involvement in either the Muggle occult, religion or some other form of self-development during a Muggle life. That's how." Rianne told her. "Progress far enough and the soul will pick up magical abilities. Once you've got them, however basic, you'll be a mage. And you can then develop them over more lives. It does help incarnating into a mage family though because you then have genetics and upbringing giving you a hand."

"Ooh. Fascinating. Hang on though." Deanna noted a snag in Rianne's reasoning. "An ascetic lifestyle? By that logic, Marlie should be a Squib by now."

"Tyler!" yelled Marlie.

"I think you only need that in order to become one. Once you've got your powers, you can live how you like, you're unlikely to lose them. Which also accounts for the Malfoys, I believe." Rianne gazed off into the middle distance.

"A mage could incarnate into a Muggle family then." said Luella, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"Oh yes. Why do you ask?" Rianne returned her attention to Luella, cool brown eyes now lazily drawing information from her friend.

"Because I know who I was. And Deanna too."

"Yeah?" All three of them turned round to look at her now, their interest well and truly caught.

"How?" asked Marlie.

"Yeah, and who the hell were we then? Not Malfoys I hope!" The disapproval did not mask the curiosity.

"Course not. We were twin sisters. Our mother was a Muggle-born witch. I don't know who our father was, but our mother is my great-aunt this time around. We were called Diana and Louise. You were an Auror."

"I was?" Deanna blinked in surprise. "Was I any good?"

"I think you were. You got killed in action though."

Deanna shrugged. "These things happen. Voldie then, I take it."

Luella nodded. Deanna digested the information, before a smile began to spread across her features. "I was an Auror! Cool!" The euphoria faded a little, leaving a look of thoughtfulness. "I wonder if Mum knew her. They must have been serving together at the same time, if it was during the Reign of Terror."

"What were you doing, Lu?" Rianne asked.

At this, Luella felt her enthusiasm die away. "I got married." she said simply.

"Who to? Anyone famous?"

"My school sweetheart. He was an Auror too."

"Oh. Right." Rianne's interest began to fade away. "So you were the same age as Tyler then?"

"Yeah. We were twins. She was Slytherin, I was Ravenclaw."

"Figures." snorted Marlie.

Deanna looked at Luella, a deep, searching look that seemed almost as if she was seeing her for the first time. Luella began to feel uncomfortable under such intense scrutiny, but she didn't look away. It was only Deanna, after all. And yet, she'd never felt anything like this degree of intimacy. Deanna just smiled, reaching out to touch her cheek.

"It explains a lot." she whispered. "Explains a hell of a lot... sister."

Silence. Just those dark eyes holding her prisoner. And in that moment, Luella could almost see Deanna as she'd been back then, clear blue eyes and silken brown hair curling around a face that, while different, wasn't that different. It was like Luella's own, but with a certain hardness that hers lacked, with sharper features and an uncompromising cast that indicated that this was the twin you didn't mess about with. No change there then. And another thing that hadn't changed was the rush of love Luella felt looking at her, a feeling of warmth and safety, a feeling that as long as her

beloved friend and sister was here, nothing could touch her, nothing could hurt her, that all was well with the world...

And then came Hermione's voice, slicing through the ties that bound them, releasing both from their trance.

"Don't you think that's all just a bit unlikely?"

Luella started, blinking from the shock of being transported back into the real world. The sudden bursting of their private bubble had left her too disorientated to react. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Deanna, who was less than pleased. Turning to face this obstinate second year who had dared to intrude on her privacy, tenderness had boiled over into rage.

"And what, *Granger*, does it have to do with you?" The use of the surname said everything you needed to know about the level of intimacy Deanna was prepared to extend to the young Gryffindor. However, brave to the last, Hermione didn't falter, despite being on the receiving end of a look that would have caused anyone else to turn tail and run while they still had their limbs and faculties intact.

"Just that isn't it a bit unlikely for you both to be born as sisters, conveniently die at the same time, then just *decide* to come back as two fourteen year old best mates? Come on, there's a lot of chance involved here, isn't there? That's if the phenomena actually exists at all, and you two aren't completely deluded."

"Hermione," Luella had by this time recovered her composure and felt personally insulted that her integrity was being brought into question. "I 'saw' my own death. In such detail that when I described it to someone who'd actually been there, she was stunned at how I could possibly have known. I know I'll never prove it to your satisfaction, but I believe it."

"Are you calling my friend a liar?" Deanna's temper was under control but only just, and Luella could see the fingers of her left hand curling into a dueller's grip.

"No..." said Hermione, uncertainty beginning to damp down her courage. Hermione was no fool and recognised the signs clearly enough. Deanna could have her wand out and a curse flying her way in less time than it took to breathe. Time to be diplomatic. "Just that she might be mistaken."

"Well, she's not." Deanna snarled at her. "Deal with it."

"It doesn't rely on chance though, does it?" came Rianne's rather calmer tones. "Of course Deanna and Lu are mates this time around. They knew each other before and like each other for precisely that reason. Chances are they chose to incarnate together once more for reasons we can only speculate on. They didn't find each other again by chance, it was almost certainly planned on. As for them conveniently dying, you forget that one was an Auror and one married to an Auror, and this during the Reign of Terror. Their dying isn't a fluke, it's a near inevitability."

"Well... I suppose so..." Hermione didn't seem anything as sure of herself as she had done before.

"Tell you what, Hermione, why don't I explain the entire theory of the mage afterlife to you on the way to lunch?" offered Rianne.

"Erm... OK." Hermione was always open to learning new things and if it meant not having Deanna glaring at her, so much the better. Smiling, Rianne led her off, explaining about the three-fold nature of humanity and other esoteric subjects.

Marlie coughed delicately. "Er... I might leave you two to it myself. I need to talk to Rachel about something. See you both!" She raced off towards the Great Hall.

Leaving the two of them standing there alone.

"Look, Deanna, I'm really sorry about that. I didn't know she was listening, or I'd have said later." Luella began.

Deanna dismissed her attempt at apology. "Don't worry. Not your fault Granger's a nosy cow with nothing better to do than intervene in private conversations. Gods, but she's begging for a hexing, and one of these days she's going to get one if she does it again. Now. Where were we?" Reaching out, she pulled Luella into her arms and hugged her. "You know, don't you, that whatever happens, doesn't matter what, you can rely on me, don't you? I mean, I'm not going to abandon you or anything. Not before and certainly not now."

"I know." Luella whispered. "I know." She returned the embrace.

"Good." Deanna let her go. "Come on. Let's go to lunch."

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"Reckon she'll be talking to us yet?" Harry asked Ron as they settled down to their sandwiches.

"Doubt it." replied Ron, seemingly unbothered by the fact. "You know what she's like about Lockhart. Give it a few days or so."

"All the same, it was pretty low." Harry fidgeted with his glass of apple juice, starting to feel guilty at the way they'd treated Hermione. "She's convinced the Syndicate's morally wrong and then we go and join it. I wonder if we did the right thing."

"Harry, give it a rest." Ron reached for another sausage roll. "This Syndicate's a great idea. We need never do any of Lockhart's homework again, and we get to make some money out of it. Harry, it has no flaws. It is perfect. Don't worry about Hermione, you know what she's like about breaking rules."

"She didn't seem to mind about the rules before Christmas." Harry pointedly reminded him.

"Yeah, but that was different. That had a high and noble purpose. This is purely to make money and stitch up her favourite teacher in the process. Course she's going to disapprove. She's a girl, isn't she? They're like that. Well," he corrected himself, "our girls are. Slytherin girls don't seem to be, not when there's cash involved anyway."

"Is that a good thing or not?" Harry asked, curious.

"It can be. Suppose it'd be nice to be able to plan things without having someone protest that that's against the rules. As long as all that corruption and plotting isn't directed at me."

"Oh, so corruption's OK as long as you're benefiting?" Harry teased.

"Yes, I mean no, I mean don't be silly, Harry, of course I'm not corrupt, and anyway you joined the Syndicate before I did."

"Only because you didn't have the money."

"Give it a month or so and I will!" Ron leaned back in his chair, smiling contentedly. "God, Harry, it's going to be brilliant, finally having some money at last! I'll actually be able to wear clothes that have never been worn by anyone else before, and buy all sorts of stuff that I don't need and don't really want but buy anyway just because I can. Malfoy'll never be able to pick on me again! Won't it be great?"

"Bear in mind he's probably a Syndicate member too." Harry warned him. "He is Marlie Lovegood's cousin after all, I expect she's asked him."

"Harry, don't ruin the moment here. Let me dream." sighed Ron.

"OK, OK. So, Ron. May I take it your attitude towards Slytherins has mellowed a little then?"

"Well... maybe." Ron admitted. "They're not so bad. Not all of them. If you keep them where you can see them, keep one hand on your wand at all times, don't eat or drink anything they offer you, and don't lend them any money you'd like to see back again. They do come up with some cool ideas. Some of them I almost respect. Tyler, for example."

"What, Lu's mate?" Harry asked, without thinking.

"Yes, of course Luella Martin's mate. How many other Tylers are there in Slytherin?" snapped Ron. "You know, if, and this is a very big if, I needed to put my trust in a Slytherin, it would be Tyler. She's honest, you know? You know where you are with her. She'd never try to stab you in the back or anything. Admittedly, that's because she'd usually be far too busy hexing you to death from the front, but even then at least you couldn't say you weren't warned. If she doesn't like you, you'll know about it. I wouldn't say I liked her exactly, but I don't despise her either."

"So if not all Slytherins are baby dark mages, does this mean you're going to start talking to Ginny again?" Harry asked, Ron's newfound respect for certain Slytherins

being too good an opportunity to waste. Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if Ron's charity extended that far. He clammed up at once, cold, icy and oddly reminiscent of Percy.

"Ginny's made it quite clear where she stands on the subject. She no longer wants to talk to me. So be it. I won't talk to her. End of story."

Harry rolled his eyes in despair, fighting the urge to grab Ron by the robes and scream at him to stop being so childish. Yes, Ginny had said some pretty hurtful things, but nothing Ron hadn't deserved. Fortunately, Harry was saved having to put any more pressure on his self-control by Hermione's arrival.

"Hi, Hermi." said Ron, brightening up almost immediately. "How's things?"

Hermione appeared to have quite forgotten about the Syndicate. "Cool! I've just been talking to Rianne Stormosi about reincarnation, it's a fascinating subject! Did you know that we've got three bits making us up, the body, soul and spirit? The body's the home of all our animal instincts, physical urges and intuition, the soul's the home of the conscious mind, and the spirit's our higher self that guides us through life. The spirit's also the bit that reincarnates - after we die, the soul transfers everything it's learnt and felt and experienced over to the spirit before fading away. And the spirit remembers it all and uses it to plan its next life, but because it's getting all the memories second-hand, it isn't so attached to them and so is able to take a more charitable view of things."

"Harry, make her stop." Ron groaned. "Please."

Hermione ignored him. "And because when we're alive we think from our souls, we don't recall anything about what went before. We only find out if the spirit decides it's the right time for us to know. And if we do remember, we're not so bothered because it didn't happen to our current soul. But we can recognise people we knew before because chances are our respective spirits arranged it and because our spirits will have been in touch during our past lives too."

"Harry, *please*." Ron pleaded.

"And then there's how it all ties into evolution-"

"Hermione." Harry interrupted. Interesting as the subject was, Ron looked like he was seriously considering spontaneously combusting in order to get away from Hermione's lecture, and Harry felt it was time he stepped in and helped him. Besides, he did have something he needed to talk to her about, after all. "Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure! Go ahead." smiled Hermione. It seemed they'd caught her in a Sharing of Knowledge Mood, although to be honest, Hermione seemed to spend most of her life feeling that way.

"I was wondering if you had any thoughts on this." He produced the diary. Hermione took it from him and flicked through it.

"1943?" she asked, frowning. "What's a 1943 diary doing in 1993 Hogwarts? Has Snape opened up a hole in the space-time continuum or something?"

"Wouldn't put it past him." muttered Ron.

"No, I don't think so." Harry told her. "But think about the date. What happened fifty years ago?"

There was a pause as Hermione took a few seconds to work out why fifty years was significant. Then the penny dropped. "This diary might hold some clues as to who opened the chamber first time around!" Hermione gasped in delight, her mind racing swiftly from one logical step to the next. "And if we know that, we can work out who's doing it now! Brilliant, Harry, brilliant!"

"Just one snag." Ron pointed out. "It's blank."

"Doesn't mean a thing." said Hermione dismissively. "There's all sorts of ways of making text invisible. Oh Harry, we've got to get back to the common room, start experimenting! Who knows what we might find out? We should check out the library too, see if there's any charms in there."

"Oh wonderful." muttered Ron. "More time in the library. What fun."

"Oh Ron, stop being such a philistine." Hermione told him. "Books are good for you."

"According to my mum, sprouts are good for me, but I've yet to see any evidence." replied Ron. Hermione glared at him and what promised to be a heated argument looked about to break out, until it was rudely interrupted by a cry of "Trevor!"

The three Gryffindors watched as Neville's toad Trevor leapt onto the table, sitting in the midst of the plates and serving dishes, blinking innocuously as he looked around. Then Neville arrived on the scene, flushed and out of breath.

"There you are, Trevor, I've been looking all over for you!" he cried. "Don't mind me, Harry, I'll be out of your way in a minute- aaahhh!!" Once again, Neville's clumsiness had got the better of him. The edge of his robe somehow managed to get caught under his foot and Neville ended up sprawling across the table, sending food in all directions, plates about three inches into the air, and Ron's glass of red grape juice toppling over. Right over the diary.

Harry made to snatch it out of harm's way, but it was too late. The little book was dripping wet, and was now likely to have some lovely red stains as well. Great. Just great. Harry hoped it wouldn't interfere with whatever magic was hiding the text, but he wasn't hopeful.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" Neville gasped, trying to sort out the mess, without success. He was trying to mop up the spilled drink with a napkin but it wasn't working very well, especially as the drink was now dripping onto the floor as well.

"Quite alright, Neville." said Ron through gritted teeth, trying to dry himself.

"Wasn't your fault." Hermione tried to comfort the stricken boy, using a Quick-Drying Charm on her robes.

"I didn't mean to trip, it was an accident!" Neville sniffled.

"We know." said Ron curtly.

"It's alright, Neville, really." Hermione soothed him. "We can get this cleared up. You go and have your lunch."

"Yes, please Neville, go and have your lunch. Now." Ron's tones were rather less comforting than Hermione's.

Neville nodded, still sniffing and headed off, cradling Trevor in his arms.

"Bloody hell, look at me." sighed Ron. "Thank the gods it's Saturday and I can get changed. Honestly, Neville doesn't get any better, does he?"

Harry despondently wiped as much grape juice as possible off the diary. "You would have to have picked the red stuff, wouldn't you Ron? This diary's going to look like one of those ink-blot psychological tests now. Hope it hasn't done any real damage to it."

"I wouldn't worry, it might have Protection Charms on it or something." Hermione reassured him. "Open it, see what the damage is."

Harry did so, and gaped. Instead of the Rorschach blot he'd expected to see, the diary was as white and stain-free as it had ever been. It wasn't even wet. Harry remembered finding it in the first place and realising that the pages had been bone dry despite the diary having been submerged. An idea began to form.

"Hermione, pass me an ink bottle."

She did so, watching him rather strangely. Ron too was looking at him as if firmly convinced that his friend had finally cracked. Steeling himself against their disbelieving gazes, he let a few drops of ink fall onto one of the pages. And watched in amazement as the paper absorbed it entirely. Seconds later, it was as if he'd never marked the page.

Hermione and Ron were staring at him open-mouthed.

"Wow." whispered Ron. "How does it do that?"

"It absorbs whatever liquid touches it!" breathed Hermione. "Well, that magic must have been placed on the diary after it had been written in, or the text would have just disappeared - wait a second, maybe it did! Maybe that's the idea." Hermione sat up, a brainwave of tsunami-like proportions breaking onto the shores of her mind. "Harry! Try writing in it!" She passed him a quill. Harry dipped it in the ink bottle and held it poised above the paper.

"What should I write?"

"Anything! Just say hello or something."

Harry obediently wrote the single word *Hello*. The writing promptly disappeared. All three of them peered at the diary with bated breath.

And got the shock of their lives when it wrote back.

Hello. Who are you?

"What do I do?" breathed Harry.

"Reply." hissed Ron. "Tell it your name."

Harry did so. *My name's Harry Potter. Who are you?*

The reply came almost at once. *I am Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?*

"What do I tell it?" whispered Harry.

"Nothing." came Hermione's reply. "We're going back to the common room right now, while everyone's at lunch and we're going to carry on with this there. Come on."

Harry closed the book and followed them both out. At last, it looked like they were going to find out who the Heirs were. He should have been feeling excited about what they were going to uncover. So why was it that every time the diary had written back, he'd felt a little twinge in his scar, a little stab of cold in his heart, a distinct sense that all was not well? He brushed the thought out of his mind. He was being paranoid. It wasn't really a twinge was it? More of an itch, really. Nothing to worry about. Quickening his pace, he hurried after his friends.

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Weeks passed. January turned into February. Candlemas, the day that marked the beginning of the end of winter, came and went. The Syndicate grew that bit bigger as Marlie insisted on recruiting Fred and George ("after all, we do need someone to market it in Gryffindor too, and there's no better salesmen than those two - RIANNE STOP SMIRKING! I do NOT fancy Fred!") while Rianne managed to persuade the others to let Lucas Vetinari join ("he's a mate of mine, I'd feel bad about not letting him in, and besides, if he joins, he'll have more money to put on the sweepstake - one word out of you, Marls, and you won't sleep for a week." "None are really occurring to me right now, Ri. Except maybe 'hypocrite'."). Paul Clearwater announced with pride that they had more than enough to get started, so a quill was duly ordered and arrived by the end of January. It was an instant success, with requests and deposits in the first month yielding enough money to order yet another one.

It soon became obvious among the teachers that something strange was going on.

"Gilderoy, I can't help noticing that ALL grades in your subject among my students have shot through the roof."

"I know, it's quite unbelievable, Severus. I'm sure I don't know how they're doing it." Lockhart beamed. "I suppose it must be down to my inspirational teaching finally taking root!"

"Must be." murmured Severus, turning away to come face to face with Minerva McGonagall, looking thin-lipped even by her standards.

"Severus, it has come to my attention that certain of my students are performing rather well in Defence Against the Dark Arts all of a sudden. I wonder if you could shed any light on the subject."

"Minerva, I teach Potions, as you surely know by now. Why not ask Gilderoy? It's his area of expertise not mine."

"That wasn't what I was getting at." Minerva pulled herself up to her full height, fixing Snape with a stare that made even him nervous. "Such improvements do not happen so widely overnight. Is it not perhaps possible that something underhand is going on here?"

"Minerva, I am at a loss to understand why you think I would know anything about the possible cause." Severus protested. "After all, it is nothing to do with me."

Minerva's eyes gleamed with cold as she moved in for the kill. "Maybe not you personally. However, there seems to be a trail of evidence leading slowly and inexorably back to the students of Slytherin House. What do you have to say about that, Severus?"

"Oh that's right, as soon as you suspect anything underhand, try and pin it on the Slytherins, I know." Severus sneered. "So what have you found out?"

"The students that show the most improvement all tend to be in Slytherin. Out of all the sudden improvers, there are more Slytherins than any other house combined. The earliest improvers were largely Slytherin. And there are almost no Hufflepuff improvers. I think we can safely conclude from this that the ringleaders are almost certainly in your House." She fixed him with her most penetrating gaze. Severus, however, was not to be intimidated.

"Very possibly. However, workshy, cunning and ambitious could describe any of my students. You're not really narrowing it down here." Severus purred, with an insouciance he cultivated especially for the purpose of infuriating Minerva McGonagall.

"Oooh, you...!" she seethed at him. "Severus, are you or are you not interested in finding out who is responsible for this and what they are playing at?"

"Oh most certainly." Severus replied calmly. "I want to congratulate them on their brilliance."

"Severus!" Minerva screamed. "Be serious!"

"I am being serious."

Minerva gave a strangled cry. "Severus! They are almost certainly cheating at their homework! Aren't you going to punish them at all?"

"I would. If the homework merited the name." Severus let the infuriating, almost Zen-like calmness go, its purpose achieved. "Listen, Minerva. Have you noticed any signs of improvement in any other subject than Lockhart's?"

"No." she was forced to admit.

"Exactly. Now if you were forced to do an assignment of his against your will, despite having a million and one better things to do with your time, and you discovered a quick and easy way of getting it done and out of the way, with no drop in quality of the work and maybe even an improvement, wouldn't you take it?"

"Well... maybe." Minerva admitted, a smile starting to creep across her face. "Oh Severus, I suppose I can't really blame them. In fact, I'm immensely curious as to how they've managed it. It must be incredibly ingenious. I don't normally say this, Severus, but twenty points to Slytherin for producing some kind of genius. Well done!" The smile faded. "Of course, if this trend starts occurring in other subjects, I will have to put a stop to it, you understand."

"Of course, Minerva. And I shall do my utmost to assist you." Severus promised. He paused. "Unless it happens to be Sybil Trelawney's lessons."

"Severus, everyone's always cheated in Divination, I wouldn't worry." Minerva smiled. "In fact, I'm not at all sure that it's possible not to resort to fraud in that subject."

"Oh, it's possible." Severus observed. "It's just not very easy."

Minerva appeared sceptical. "If you say so, Severus." She lowered her voice. "Valentine's Day tomorrow. Any idea what Gilderoy's planning?"

Severus shook his head. "No. He's being very close-lipped on the subject. I tried guile, I tried cunning, I tried manipulation. Nothing doing. He just keeps hinting he has this special surprise planned. I don't know what he's up to, but I think it involves large amounts of pink confetti and some midgets."

"Midgets?" The other teacher stared at him, unable, or to be more precise, unwilling, to imagine what on earth Lockhart could want midgets for.

"Midgets." As a Slytherin and a veteran of one too many of Lucius Malfoy's parties, Severus could imagine only too clearly why Lockhart might want midgets, and it wasn't a particularly cheering thought.

"Oh dear gods. What has he got planned?" Severus had hardly ever seen Minerva McGonagall worried before. It wasn't a pleasant sight. "Still, this is a school, there'll be children present, it won't be that bad, will it?" She tried to sound optimistic.

"It's what he's planning for the staffroom afterwards that worries me." said Severus darkly.

"Severus!" snapped Minerva. "You're being paranoid."

"I am not!" protested Severus. "Minerva, he keeps flirting with me, and three times in the last week I've caught him eyeing me up. He's not even bothering to hide it anymore. I'm telling you, if he sends me a Valentine, I will personally grab him by the overly decorated lapels of his robes and..."

"Severus!" McGonagall interrupted. "I forbid you to inflict any damage on Gilderoy Lockhart. No matter how much he provokes you."

"Oh go on." Severus pouted. "Please? Let me kill him, let me. I can make it look like an accident. Go on, Minerva, you know you want to. I'm very discreet."

A muscle began twitching in McGonagall's cheek, the same muscle that always twitched whenever she had to bite back what she really wanted to say.

"I'm sure you can," she replied, the ghost of a smile playing around her features, "but we'd never find a suitable replacement at such short notice. Good Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers are hard to find these days."

"I noticed."

"Now, now, Severus. I'm sure it won't be that bad. It can't be." McGonagall looked at Severus, an expression of dawning anxiety crossing her face. "Can it?"

"I don't know." said Severus, equally apprehensive. "But I'll tell you this, I've never felt more like calling in sick."

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"Poppy, please." Severus begged Madam Pomfrey the following morning. "Say I'm ill. Please. I'll be an exemplary patient. I'll just stay in a private room with my books and some marking. You won't even know I'm there. Please?"

Madam Pomfrey was having none of it. "No. Look, I'm sorry Severus, but there's a lot of colds and flu going around, there are people genuinely ill, I cannot give away valuable bed space to those who just want an excuse to avoid school! Including you, Severus."

"I can be genuinely ill if you like." Severus offered. "I know lots of potions that'll create the symptoms of any illness you care to name. Come on, Poppy, please?"

"Severus, no!" the mediwitch snapped at him. "If I find you here presenting any symptoms that are not certified as genuine and unsimulated by Professor Dumbledore himself, I shall refuse to treat you. Do you understand?"

"Poppy, I beg you." Severus pleaded. "You don't know... you don't know what he's like! He keeps winking at me and... and... smiling at me and... dropping hints. Oh gods, he has something horrible planned, I just know it! Something involving me, and flowers, and chocolates, and a bottle of Chianti, and a troupe of performing midgets."

"Midgets?" Poppy stared at him.

"I'm telling you, there's a whole group of them staying at Rosmerta's. According to Hagrid, they're here for some kind of Valentine's Day event, and the only one I know of is this surprise Lockhart's got planned. Poppy, I beg you, if you have any sympathy for me at all, *please* don't let him anywhere near me! Please!" Severus threw himself at her feet, all dignity forgotten, or rather, sacrificed in the hope of avoiding a greater humiliation.

"Severus, you have my sympathies, you really do." Madam Pomfrey sighed. "However, you're the fourth member of staff to try that this morning. If I said yes to you all, there'd be no one left to do any teaching."

"Who were the other three?" Severus asked, looking up.

"Mildred Hooch, Libitina Vector and oddly enough, Ebenezer Binns."

"Binns?!? What was wrong with him, ectoplasm not clammy enough?" raged Severus, getting to his feet. "Were the chains perhaps getting a little rusty? Was he feeling insufficiently wraithlike? Honestly, Poppy, what is there to go wrong with a *ghost*?"

"He reckoned that the room temperature wasn't dropping around him like it should. Severus, stop sneering. It's a very serious complaint for a ghost. It means the soul's getting weaker, and if that happens, then the ghost either has to find the Underworld before it's too late, or risk dying completely, with no chance of ever passing the memories to the spirit. It's very serious."

"Is it. And was Binns suffering at all?" sneered Severus.

"No, there was nothing wrong with him so I told him to get back to teaching. Just as there is nothing wrong with you, so why don't you stop wasting my time and get to breakfast!"

"Alright, alright." muttered Severus. "I'm going. This will be remembered, Poppy. Next time you need my assistance." He swept out of the hospital wing, and with a heavy heart, headed for breakfast.

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It turned out Severus wasn't the only Hogwarts teacher who was worried. On the way to breakfast, he found himself running into Hagrid and Mildred Hooch, who looked as miserable as he felt.

"Morning, Severus." snarled Mildred.

"Good morning, Mildred. Feeling better?"

"No." she hissed at him. "And it isn't a good morning, as you should surely know by now. Forgotten the date, have we?"

"As if I could. So, you tried the old calling in sick routine as well, did you?"

"The trouble with Poppy is that she is just too darn good!" Mildred snapped. "I spent ages trying to fake Chaser's Elbow too. Saw right through it within seconds, damn the woman. Now I'll have to spend all day putting up with over-excited teenagers cooing over Valentines, couples working off their excess hormones, and that fool Gilderoy grinning all day and asking me how many cards I got this morning."

"Why, how many did you get this morning?" Severus asked.

"None of your damn business."

Severus couldn't help smiling. He'd always liked Mildred Hooch. A fellow misanthrope, with very little love of anything that smacked of sentimentality and both feet rooted firmly on the ground, when she wasn't flying anyway. Hard to believe she was an ex-Hufflepuff.

"Ah don' know what yeh're so worried abou'." Hagrid put in. "It's only once a year, after all. Jus' one day where we can all let our 'air down an' 'ave a bit o' fun, like. So what if Gilderoy's a bit over-enthusiastic. Don't mind 'im, he'll go away if yeh ignore 'im. Works fer me."

"Hagrid, if he stays longer than a quarter of an hour, you've trained Fang to start snarling at him." Mildred pointed out.

"Ah didn' train 'im!" Hagrid protested. "Fang learnt that all by 'imself. 'E's a very intelligent dog, yeh know. Great judge o' character."

"He runs and hides under the nearest table if I go anywhere near him." Severus observed.

Hagrid roared with laughter, slapping Severus on the back. "There yeh go then! Great judge o' character, my Fang, great judge."

Mildred snickered as Severus staggered forward, trying to regain his balance. After a few minutes, he righted himself.

"Yes, well, I'm sure he's a very talented and useful animal deep down." he said testily. "Very deep down." he added under his breath. Hagrid was noted for his easygoing

nature, but on the other hand, he was bigger than Severus, part-giant and *very* fond of his animals, and it didn't do to push him.

They were getting nearer the Great Hall. And one of the first things Severus noted, his heart sinking at the realisation, was how quiet it was. Too quiet. The noise level normally generated by three hundred students at breakfast could have drowned out a dragon. Not today.

The three of them exchanged worried glances. This was not good news. You didn't spend ten years or more in teaching without learning to recognise the signs. Severus drew his wand and motioned for the other two to follow him. Slowly, very slowly, he opened one of the side doors.

And nearly dropped his wand in horror at the scene before him.

"Ber-loody Hades," he heard Hagrid whisper behind him. "What the 'ell's 'appened to our Great 'All?"

"I think I'm going to be sick." said Mildred faintly.

"Looking at the colour scheme, I think someone already has." said Severus, his eyes travelling the length and breadth of the room in disbelief at the sheer tastelessness of it all. The walls were coated in pink flowers. And not small, discreet and delicate pink flowers either. These were huge, massive, bright, lurid, big pink flowers, in various shades ranging from Hot Pink to Day-Glo Pink to Big, Bold, Don't-Look-At-Without-Sunglasses Pink, and a few shades that Dulux haven't got names for yet. Equally horrible pink balloons with matching ribbons attached had been hung from the ceiling, and not a few had been tied to the House tables. Severus was gratified to see that the ones on the Slytherin table had already been detached and were even now being used in what resembled an impromptu game of volleyball, those that weren't lying in pieces on the floor anyway, while the flower arrangements were merrily burning away. Ah, my beloved Slytherins, I have taught you well, he thought with pride, gleefully noting the envious looks on the faces of the other Houses, who were wishing they could get away with that sort of thing, although Fred and George Weasley were even now beginning to loosen some of the balloons at their table. Most of the other students, however, seemed too stunned or too revolted to want to say anything.

The most horrific sight of all though was waiting for them at the staff table. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of bright pink, beaming at the scene before him.

"Pink robes? With blonde hair?" whispered Mildred to Severus. "I thought gay men were meant to have immaculate dress sense and impeccable taste?"

"Lockhart was obviously too busy trying to decide what to wear when the gods were dishing out the taste genes." Severus whispered back. "Although he did try to ask Caitlin Tyler out in September, so maybe you're wrong."

Mildred just nodded sagely. "Caitlin Tyler, eh? That figures. It's the need for a dominant mother figure plus the hints of having suffered at the hands of men. She's got a very large gay fan club of both sexes."

"And how would you know that?" Severus raised an eyebrow. At this, Mildred just coughed and blushed, looking hurriedly away. Severus just rolled his eyes. You learnt something new about your colleagues every day.

Unluckily for him, though, the distraction proved fatal. Lockhart had noticed him.

"Severus!" Without further ado, Lockhart bounded over to him. Severus groaned and tried to make a run for it, but Hagrid was blocking the only escape route. Trapped, he could only turn and grit his teeth.

"Gilderoy."

"Happy Valentine's Day!" he beamed. "Come on, come and take a seat... over here... next to me..." He reached out to take Severus by the arm. Severus recoiled as if he'd been slapped.

"No need to assist me, Gilderoy, I'm quite capable of sitting down by myself." Severus snapped, resolutely sitting down in the nearest seat.

"Of course you are, Severus." cooed Lockhart. "A big strong man like you surely ought to be!" He slid gracefully into the seat next to him, not seeming to notice Hagrid sniggering on Severus's other side.

"Help me." Severus mouthed at Mildred, now seated safely at the other end of the table next to Professor Flitwick. She just grinned back at him and gave him a thumbs up. Severus could only groan inwardly. Great, trapped next to Lockhart all breakfast. Wonderful.

Fortunately, Lockhart was talking to Hagrid at the moment. "So Hagrid, how are you today? Getting into the spirit of things?"

"Ah do try, Professer Lockhart." said Hagrid modestly.

"Splendid, splendid!" Lockhart clapped his hands. "How many cards have you got so far?"

"Ah well, yeh know, me an' Fang, we don' bother much wi' Valentine's Day. Not when it's jus' the two of us at 'ome, like." Hagrid was playing the humble country unsophisticate to the hilt. Severus wished he had that option.

"Nonsense!" cried Lockhart. "Valentine's Day is for everyone! Isn't that right, Severus?" He clapped the Potions teacher heartily on the back.

For the first and only time in his life, Severus felt a twinge of regret that the days of murder and torture with the Death Eaters were over. The thought of subjecting Lockhart to some of the more soul-destroying and unpleasant tortures that Voldemort had come up with had never had so much appeal. But no. Lockhart wasn't worth Azkaban.

"Whatever you say, Gilderoy." Severus muttered.

"Of course, I'm sure *you* must get plenty of Valentine's Day cards!" Gilderoy winked at him. "Why, a good-looking man like you must have half the school lusting after him, eh Severus?" Lockhart leaned that bit closer, much to Severus's discomfort. "Did you get one with a picture of a cherub in the top right hand corner of the envelope?" he breathed in Severus's ear. "What did you think of it?" Lockhart's hand came to rest on his knee, squeezing gently before running up his thigh. Severus shot to his feet at once.

"I've got to go." he explained, heart pounding. "I've, er, got a potion on the boil and it has to be stirred every hour on the hour without fail or it's likely to explode and take half the dungeons with it."

"Oh Severus, let the house-elves deal with that!" Lockhart purred as he grabbed Severus by the sleeve and pulled him back to his seat. "Besides, it's time for my big announcement." He got to his feet, leaving Severus wondering what on earth that could be and praying that he wasn't involved in any way. The entire school being told that Professor Snape was falling head over heels for their glamorous Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was more than he could really handle right now. Too late to do anything though. Lockhart was even now motioning for silence, and launching into his speech.

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Over on the Slytherin table, the girls' initial reactions were much the same as those of Snape and Madam Hooch.

"Oh. My. God." was all Deanna could say when she walked in.

"It's very, er, pink." said Luella, trying to be generous.

Rianne just looked around, taking it all in before uttering the single word "Lockhart".

Marlie's response was the most vocal.

"Pink??" she screamed at the top of her voice. "With a ceiling *that* colour?" The enchanted ceiling was reflecting the sky outside, and it was a cloudy, overcast day. "Who on *earth* came up with that??"

"Marls, I hate to tell you this, but I think it might have been your favourite Lockhart." said Deanna, her nose wrinkling in disgust as she brushed the heart-shaped confetti off her seat. "God, look at this stuff, it's going to be all over my robes, in my hair, it's going to be turning up everywhere for weeks, I just know it."

Rianne examined one of the flower arrangements on the table. "This could do with a little... improvement." she murmured, casually fingering a rose pink petal. Smiling, she touched the tip of her wand to it. "*Ignito!*" The flowers promptly burst into flames, and Rianne sat back, smiling with satisfaction. Some of the other Slytherins noticed this and before long half the vases on the table were burning away, with flames in just about every colour of the rainbow.

Marlie took a seat, checking herself in the pocket mirror she always carried with her. "Hmm. I might be OK, it seems to camouflage with blonde hair. You on the other hand, Tyler, are screwed."

"She wishes." came Draco's snide tones. "Get any Valentines yet, Tyler?"

"No." Deanna snarled at him. Draco was sitting about three seats down, alone for once.

"Too bad." he purred. "I've got hundreds from all my many admirers. Crabbe and Goyle are back at the Nest right now opening them all for me. Such a hard life being a sex symbol, you know. Except you wouldn't, but hey, let's not argue."

"Makes a change." muttered Rianne. She changed tack, something occurring to her. "Hey, Malfoy. When you say Crabbe and Goyle are 'opening' your Valentines, you don't perhaps mean 'writing them so you don't look like a complete loser', do you?"

"No, of course not." snapped Draco. However, Luella couldn't help noticing that he seemed a little... rattled. His blushes were saved by the arrival of Pansy Parkinson, clutching a red envelope which she lost no time in presenting to him with a kiss.

"Hello, Drakie-poo." she cooed. "I got you a Valentine."

"Why, thank you, Pan." He produced a red envelope from inside his robes and handed it to her. "I got you one too."

The two of them both sat down, too busy ripping their cards open and reading them to get any more sentimental, for which the girls were extremely thankful.

"Oh, how sweet!" squealed Pansy. "Drakie darling, you are such a romantic - hang on." She scanned the card again, the insincere smile turning into an all too sincere snarl. "Draco!" she yelled. "This was written with one of our Quills! Don't deny it, I can tell the writing style! Using a Quick Quotes Quill to write a Valentine card, you complete and utter bastard!" She picked up a bread roll and threw it at him. Draco dived under the table.

"Pansy, now Pansy, don't be cross, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I was just feeling uninspired, and I didn't want to write you anything but the best, Pansy I'm sorry, I really am, please stop hitting me, ow!" Pansy had abandoned throwing food at him and had now resorted to slapping him repeatedly instead.

"Your card was lovely, really!" yelled Draco. "It was really sweet, very touching, very well put together and it even rhymed - wait a second." Pushing Pansy away, he got to his feet and snatched up her card, rereading it. "As I thought!" he shouted triumphantly. "You used a Quill too, didn't you? Admit it. You did didn't you?"

Pansy immediately stopped trying to attack Draco and began to blush. She swiftly turned on the charm. "Oh but Draco, I was just using it to do some homework, and your card happened to be there at the time, and it was just too tempting and... oh

Draco, you won't be angry at me, will you?" She pouted at him, fluttering her eyelids in a little girl way that really didn't suit her.

"Good gods, Pan." sighed Draco. "Just don't blame me for doing it ever again, you hear? Come on, sit down, let's have some breakfast."

The fourth years watched in disbelief as the two of them began tucking into their cereal.

"I really don't believe those two sometimes." sighed Rianne. "Honestly, the rank hypocrisy in that relationship takes some beating."

Marlie agreed. "The only thing more puzzling than what he sees in her is what she sees in him."

"That's easy enough." laughed Deanna. "He's rich and from an influential family, and she's an overly made-up tart who flatters his ego at every opportunity. Don't you think so, Lu? Lu?" She noticed Luella watching the teachers' table, frowning. "What's up, Lu?"

"That's odd." said Luella thoughtfully. "Professor Snape just leapt up like someone's set fire to him. I wonder what's going on over there."

Deanna turned and looked, just in time to see Lockhart pull him back into his seat. "There's your answer, Lu. That famous self-control finally snapped, and he's trying to make a bid for freedom. Can't say I blame him."

"Oh gods." groaned Rianne. "He's getting up. He's going to make a speech. Take cover!"

Lockhart had indeed got to his feet, trademark stupid grin plastered all over his face.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" he shouted.

"Drop dead." muttered Rianne.

"And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards!"

Three sets of eyes swivelled to look at Marlie, who immediately became very interested in fiddling with the strap on her bag.

"I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all - and the fun doesn't stop here!"

Across the table from Luella, Rianne looked as if she was losing the will to live.

Lockhart clapped his hands. From the main doors leading into the entrance hall came a troupe of dwarves, decked out in golden wings, carrying harps. Marlie gasped in an odd mixture of delight and foreboding.

"Oh my god, he's got some midgets in!" she whispered.

"Midgets?" asked Luella, confused.

"Yeah, midgets." Marlie nodded.

"They're a standard fixture at all the major Slytherin parties." Rianne explained. "No gathering is complete without them. If there's midgets in attendance, that only means one thing - decadence, excess and enough iniquity to keep the televangelism industry in business for years."

"But that sort of thing's not allowed at Hogwarts, surely?" gasped Luella.

Rianne shrugged. "Who can tell? Quite possibly no one told Lockhart what kind of people hire troupes of performing midgets. Either that or the staff are planning one hell of a party."

Both Deanna and Marlie gagged.

"Rianne, that's gross."

"Oh my god, can you imagine any of them, you know, doing it?"

It was now Rianne's turn to screw up her face in disgust. "Gods. That's truly horrible. I am so sorry, you guys."

"So you should be." Deanna told her. "Don't ever do it again."

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" Lockhart announced. Luella blinked and looked at them again. They didn't seem very friendly to her, and she'd never seen cupids with beards before.

"They will be roving around the school today to deliver your Valentines!"

"There you go, Tyler." said Rianne promptly. "You can stop worrying about them - if they're only delivering Valentines, they won't be going near you all day." She had to duck to avoid the croissant that Deanna sent flying her way.

"I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to whip up a Love Potion!"

All four of them turned to look at their House Master.

"Dare you!" whispered Marlie to Deanna.

Deanna looked at Snape again. That was not an expression you normally associated with romance and matchmaking. That was an expression you normally associated with the Mafia. And yet, she couldn't resist the opportunity to tease him. So it was that after breakfast finished, Deanna made straight for her Potions Master with her friends

in tow. It wasn't easy. He was ducking through the crowds, snarling at any student who got in his way (no change there then), trying desperately to look inconspicuous.

"Morning, sir." Deanna grinned as she caught up with him in one of the corridors leading off from the Great Hall. "So, any chance of one of them Love Potions then?"

A few nearby Hufflepuffs gasped in horror and swiftly made their escape, hardly daring to believe that someone had dared to tease Professor Snape of all people, and convinced that Deanna Tyler was about to meet her maker. However, it didn't happen.

"Under no circumstances." Snape snarled at her. "Please, Miss Tyler, please tell me you of all people haven't succumbed to this romantic Valentine's Day foolishness."

"No chance." Deanna grimaced. "Gods, but I've never seen such a tasteless spectacle since Mum showed me her old photos from the Seventies. Lockhart's surpassed himself this time, hasn't he?"

"Now, now, Miss Tyler. Your mother, whatever her faults, always had excellent dress sense. Lockhart on the other hand..." He froze as the very man's cheery tones rang out from inside the Great Hall.

"Yoo-hoo! Severus!"

Snape froze in terror, before turning to Luella. "Hide me!" he hissed at her, eyes staring wildly.

"But sir, isn't that against the rules?" said Luella, troubled.

"I don't care!" Snape snarled. "Use Glamoury, use the Imperius Curse if you like, do whatever you like, just don't let him see me!"

"Well... OK then." Luella drew him back against the wall and cast a Glamour around them both, just as Lockhart emerged into the corridor.

"Severus! Oh Severus!" he called. "Now where did he go, I'm sure he came this way." He noticed Deanna, Marlie and Rianne standing there. "Hello children! Have you seen your Potions Master at all? I'm sure I saw him pass this way."

All three girls shook their heads. "I've not seen him." said Deanna.

"He must have taken a different route." Marlie suggested.

"I think I saw him go that way." Rianne offered, pointing towards a corridor that led upwards towards the staffroom and Charms classroom.

"Ah! Thank you, young ladies! I shall go and find him forthwith!" Lockhart bustled off, calling after the absentee professor. "Severus! Where are you! Severus! It's Gilderoy here! Come out, don't be shy! I don't bite!" His voice trailed off as he disappeared round the corner.

Luella released the Glamour, allowing Snape to stagger forward, gasping with relief.

"Thank you." he whispered.

Deanna was looking at him very curiously. "What did he want then? Or do I not want to know?"

"Trust me, Miss Tyler, you really do **not** want to know." Snape shuddered. "Right, I am going back to the dungeons. And I am staying there until tomorrow. Should any of you need to see me for any reason, tap out the tune to 'Riders on the Storm' on my office door. I daresay you'll know that one, Miss Tyler."

"Yeah, it's one of Mum's favourites." Deanna grimaced. Rianne looked rather offended.

"Hey, some of us happen to **like** the Doors." she snapped.

"Weirdo." Deanna grinned. Rianne just shrugged.

"Hey, I spent a lot of time travelling as a kid. When you spend your formative years in the back of a mobile home listening to the local AOR station, these things leave a mark."

"Ooh, you poor thing." Deanna breathed, laying a hand on her arm. "Having to listen to that all day." Rianne glared at her.

"Quite." said Snape, having worse things to worry about. "I shall see you four later. And if you should happen to see Professor Lockhart again, please tell him I'm at an all-day conference on self-stirring cauldrons and won't be back until later. Much later." He turned on his heel and walked off in as swift a manner he could muster without actually having to run or heaven forbid, scurry.

"Poor thing." sighed Luella. "To have Lockhart after him. Don't blame him for wanting to avoid him."

"Lu," Rianne began, "when you say 'after him', you don't suppose it refers to performing-midgets-and-general-decadence after him, do you?"

The other three screwed up their face in disgust.

"Rianne! Stop it!"

"Didn't we tell you to stop giving us gross thoughts?" Marlie yelled.

"Gods Ri, Snape and Lockhart, that's *horrible!*" Deanna shuddered. "Please, never ever mention it again. Ever."

"Hey, I wasn't the one telling Professor Snape to stop being shy and come out!" Rianne protested. "Dear gods, now there's a phrase with some interesting double meanings. Not to mention the bit about Lockhart not biting..."

"RIANNE!" the other three screamed at her. Rianne promptly stopped talking.

"OK, OK, I'll stop there. That image is too disturbing even for me..."

"And that's saying something." Marlie commented. She was distracted by the sound of giggling behind her. Turning round, she saw Ginny Weasley huddled with her friends, giving instructions to one of the dwarfs. Stepping back, the dwarf bowed, said "Righty-oh, I'll deliver it this afternoon." and headed off, leaving three grinning first years.

"So what are you three up to?" Marlie enquired.

"Nothing." they chorused.

"Nothing, eh. So that dwarf's delivering nothing this afternoon, is he? I find it hard to believe." Marlie leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile. "Come on, you can let me in on it. I won't tell anyone. Promise."

Ginny exchanged looks with her friends. Lydia shook her head.

"Sorry, Marls." said Ginny. "I can't tell you yet. But you'll find out. I promise you, you'll love it! See ya, Marls!" The three of them left, still giggling.

Luella arrived behind her. "What was all that about then?"

"I don't know." Marlie replied. "But this I tell you, I do hope it's not directed at us."

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Fortunately for them, it wasn't. However, later on, they might begin to wish that it had been. However, that's in the future, so let us not concern ourselves with it now. Let us get back to the Valentine's Day fun and games.

It was just before the last lesson of the day. All day, the dwarves had been interrupting lessons to deliver cards, much to the students' delight and the teachers' annoyance. The only exception had been Snape's lessons, where the first dwarf to interrupt had taken one look at Snape, immediately shut up and announced that it could wait until later and hurriedly backed off. There'd been no further visits to any of Snape's classes.

And so it was that even Deanna was in a relatively good mood as the four of them made their way back from Charms. The festive atmosphere meant that no one was getting any work done, and life was generally good. They'd even managed to escape the Valentine-bearing dwarves.

Unfortunately, it was here that their luck ran out. They rounded the corner and came to a halt as one of the dwarves stepped out in front of them, brandishing a mail sack in one wand and a harp in the other, waving the instrument around like a weapon of war.

"I got a Valentine for a Miss Rianne Stormosi."

"That's me." smiled Rianne, stepping forward expectantly. The dwarf reached into his bag and produced a small jewel encrusted box, which he presented to her with a bow. Rianne took it from him and opened it. There was a flash of light, and then a jet black snake appeared, rising out of the box, swaying hypnotically to and fro, green eyes heavy-lidded but not blinking once. Hissing seductively, it lowered its head, slithered on to Rianne's wrist and began coiling up her arm, on to her shoulders and around her neck, where it settled like a scarf, all the while rubbing her affectionately. Rianne didn't seem to mind in the slightest, smiling with the same drowsy expression that the snake had in its eyes. Marlie backed away nervously, while Luella could only look on in envy. What she wouldn't give for a serpentine Valentine of her very own.

"Who's it from?" asked Deanna.

"Lucassss." hissed Rianne, clearly lost in a world of her own. Reaching into the box, she removed a small green and silver embossed card, the smile not fading for a second. "This snake is yours 'til the next day dawns. May it keep you company until I'm able to do it in person. Ever yours, LV. Ah, he's such a cutie." sighed Rianne. "Knows exactly what a woman wants. I must say thank you."

The dwarf coughed. "I got another one 'ere for a Miss Marlene Lovegood."

"That's me!" trilled Marlie, stepping forward in anticipation. The dwarf reached into his bag once more and produced a bunch of flowers for her. Beaming, Marlie took them from him and inhaled deeply.

And promptly shrieked the place down when a jet of water shot out from one of them, soaking her from the waist up.

"Fred Weasley, I'll get you for this!" she yelled to no one in particular, as the other three fell about laughing.

"There's a card with them." said the dwarf, somehow managing to keep a straight face as he presented Marlie with a small white card with a big red 'W' on the back.

"Marls, This'll teach you to go round accepting flowers from strange men, won't it? ("and you don't get much stranger than him - George") Never mind, eh. Have a cool day and enjoy the flowers - if you refill the hidden water tank, you can use them again on another unsuspecting victim. Cheerio, Fred." Marlie shook her head, still trying to shake the water off. "Typical. Absolutely typical. Look at me, I'm soaked, I'll need to get changed, my mascara must be running a mile, we've got Herbology next which involves going outside, I'm going to freeze to death, I just know it! Oooh!" She shook her hands, trying to get rid of the excess drops. "Right, that does it. I'm going back to the dorm to get changed, and get rid of these bloody things. Come on, Lu, you can come with me, help me reapply all the make-up that is now no doubt ruined."

"Rather you than me." grinned Deanna as Luella found herself dragged off by a still complaining Marlie.

"We'll save some seats for you!" Rianne called after them. "Get those flowers refilled too, we're with the Hufflepuffs. Some of them are bound to fall for it."

Deanna shook her head, still smiling. "Trust Fred to send Marls a joke Valentine. Must have taken him ages to put that together." She was about to leave when she noticed the dwarf still standing there. "Er... can we help you?"

"I've still got one Valentine left to deliver." said the dwarf obstinately. "For a Miss Deanna Tyler."

Deanna spun round to look at Rianne. "What? I've got a Valentine?"

"Don't look at me, I'm as surprised as you are!" Rianne protested. "Go on, let's see it."

Deanna took the red envelope the dwarf was holding out for her with considerable trepidation. While she wasn't a social outcast by any means, she'd never even considered herself as up for grabs romantically. To her, boys were either mates, enemies or completely outside her mental radar. To get a Valentine was something she'd not expected, and she wasn't entirely sure she liked the idea.

The card within turned out to be nothing like your typical Valentine. The background was royal blue, with a delicate golden border which depicted roses climbing up what looked like a Gothic archway, showcasing a central design. And it was hardly one to inspire romance. It was a picture of what looked like a giant bird of prey rearing triumphant over what appeared to be a mortally wounded reptile of some kind, all exquisitely drawn in glorious Technicolor. It was disturbing, and yet in its own way, strangely compelling. Deanna couldn't take her eyes off it.

"Read it, what's it say?" Rianne was urging her. Distracted, Deanna flipped it open, her mind still on the picture. She read the writing inside, which had the even inhumanity of a Quick Quotes Quill on the neutral setting. Given the success of the Syndicate lately, it could have been anyone.

"This is what you do to me on a regular basis. You, with your eyes like daggers, and your words, each one like a well-chosen slap. Know that each one cuts into me, wounding me to the core, although you'll never see it. But I wanted you to know. Wanted you to know that you have it in you to bring me to my knees. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." She lowered the card, trembling. "Who on earth..." She turned round to face the dwarf. "Who sent it? Tell me!"

"Sorry, miss." the dwarf shrugged. "Can't say. Client confidentiality and all that. Besides, this gentleman was very insistent that I tell no one he was sending it. Very insistent indeed."

"Not even me?!" Deanna demanded incredulously.

"Especially not you." The dwarf turned to go. "I gotta go. Got another Valentine on this route. Musical one this time." He walked off down the corridor, consulting a list of future victims.

"When I find out who this was..." Deanna whispered, still shaking.

"Don't like it then, huh?"

"Yes, no, I don't know, it's just... Damn them!" Deanna swore. "How dare they! How dare they send me that... thing!" She thrust the card into her bag with a shiver of disgust.

"It was very nicely drawn though." mused Rianne, stroking her snake. "I don't think they wanted to make fun of you."

"It's creepy." shuddered Deanna. "I don't like it. Don't like knowing that there's someone out there willing to go to those lengths. Someone thinking about me in that way. Ugh!"

Rianne put an arm around her friend's shoulders, not knowing quite what to say. "Hey. Don't let it get to you. Lu, Marls and me, we'll protect you. Come on, let's follow that dwarf. See which poor sucker's getting humiliated next. Take your mind off things."

Deanna nodded mutely and let Rianne lead her off.

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It didn't take long to find out who the poor sucker in question was. The two girls rounded the corner to find quite a crowd gathering, including Ginny Weasley and friends. The focus of attention seemed to be a small fight going on between the dwarf and his victim, who, Rianne realised with amusement, was none other than Harry Potter.

"What's happening?" Deanna asked a giggling Ginny. She noticed Harry engaged in a tug of war with the dwarf, trying to rip his bag out of his hands. All too successfully as it turned out, for the bag tore open, the contents flying everywhere.

"Ooh! Don't tell me Harry Potter's got a secret admirer!" Deanna laughed.

Ginny exchanged knowing grins with her friends. "You could say that, yes."

Rianne was not slow to pick up on the implication. "Wouldn't happen to be a first year Slytherin by any chance, would it?"

"Might be." Ginny admitted, blushing.

"OK, OK, it was us." Lydia confessed. "That's what we were planning this morning. We didn't have any cards, so we scribbled a verse and got it sent as a singing Valentine."

"Ginny likes him, you see, so we thought we'd help her send him something." Autumn explained.

"Autumn!" hissed a mortified Ginny. "I don't fancy Harry Potter!"

"That's not what you said the other night." grinned Lydia. Both girls laughed as Ginny squirmed, blushing even more.

"Girls, girls." Rianne intervened with a smile. "Stop teasing her. He is famous after all, and rather sweet, although personally not my type."

"No, he's more suited to Luella." Deanna smirked. "You see," she whispered conspiratorially, "Lu wants him as a toyboy. Sorry Gin, looks like you might have to share him."

"Oh." Ginny deflated. However, her gloom didn't last long. "Ah well. Never mind. Luella can have him Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I'll have him Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday. Reckon Lu'll agree?"

"Don't see why not." Deanna shrugged. "Sounds reasonable enough to me, eh Ri?"

"Perfectly sensible arrangement." Rianne agreed. Her smile faded into a frown. "Oh gods. Look who just turned up."

They all turned. And promptly grimaced to see Draco turn up with Crabbe and Goyle in tow.

"What's going on here?" drawled Draco. Harry heard the voice, looked up, groaned and started to make a run for it. Unfortunately the dwarf had other ideas.

"Not so fast, you!" grunted the dwarf, rugby tackling him to the floor and pouncing on him. "I've got a Valentine to deliver and I ain't leavin' until it's done. Right. Yer singin' Valentine."

And so the dwarf proceeded to sing. Loudly. Off-key. In such a way that you would have had to have been deaf or stupid to have missed it. Rianne and Deanna both exchanged sympathetic glances, eternally thankful that their deliveries hadn't had an audience.

At last, it was over. The dwarf got up, bowed briefly and left in search of his next victim, leaving Harry picking himself up, trying not to meet anyone's eyes. Which he didn't, but only because everyone was too busy laughing.

Autumn dried her eyes. "Oh dear. Do you think we went a bit over the top with that?"

"Don't be silly Autumn, it worked just fine." Lydia grinned. "He'll get over it."

"Hope so." whispered Ginny. "I didn't plan on having Draco Malfoy there though. Hope he doesn't pick on Harry too much."

"I wouldn't worry." Deanna told them. "Harry's tough. And besides, Malfoy would have found something to taunt him about it. That's what Malfoy does, make people's lives a misery." A shadow crossed her face, the outward sign of a memory that Rianne could identify only too clearly.

"Come on." she urged Deanna. "We'd better go, we don't want to keep Sprout waiting. It's miles to the Herbology greenhouses."

Deanna nodded and turned to say goodbye to Ginny. And paused, noticing two things. One was that Ginny appeared to have frozen on the spot. The other was Draco speaking.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?"

Deanna drew her wand and spun round. You didn't need to be a Slytherin or Rianne's intelligence to know what that meant. Drawing her own wand, she turned to see what Draco was up to now.

He was holding a small black book that had evidently fallen out of Harry's bag and waving it around, holding it just out of Harry's reach.

"Give it back, Malfoy!" Harry yelled at him.

"When I've finished reading it." Draco drawled.

"Malfoy, if you don't hand it over right now, I'll..."

"You'll what?" sneered Draco. "Do something I'll regret? I don't think so, somehow!"

"Do something!" Ginny implored the two fourth years, clearly terrified. Deanna looked at Rianne, who nodded agreement.

"*Accio!*" The book flew out of Draco's hands at once, coming in to land in Rianne's waiting hands. Draco spun round, snarling.

"What the hell do you want, Stormosi?" he raged at her.

"Lots of things." replied Rianne calmly. "A beachside villa in Ibiza. A green Lotus Esprit. Fame and fortune. The political influence and financial muscle to take out a government of my choice on a whim. My dad to stop embarrassing me. But I'll settle for you leaving Harry Potter alone and getting out of my comfort zone. You're using up my valuable oxygen, Malfoy."

"Far be it from me to inconvenience one with your 'connections'." Draco gave a little mock bow, that insolent grin showing all too clearly what he meant by connections. Rianne suppressed the urge to lash out at him. He'd keep for another day.

"I'll be on my way just as soon as I can." Draco's eyes narrowed. "Just as soon as you let me have that little book there."

"Malfoy," said Rianne evenly, "how do you want your no? Verbal or magical?" She indicated Deanna, who was even now raising her wand to Draco's eye-level. "You see, Tyler here's a bit volatile. Unpredictable. Given to using rather stronger spells than are really needed and not gifted with self-control. She's a lot like her mother in that

respect. Now, I can restrain her. But not for very long. And if my concentration were to drop for even a second..."

"Rianne," growled Deanna in a most impressive manner that she'd copied from her vast collection of thrash metal CDs, "Let me hex him. Let me. I sense the blood in his very veins, inviting a good cursing. Go on. Let me."

"Later, Tyler." purred Rianne.

"No!" Deanna snarled, her face twisting in rage. "Need... to hex him... NOW!" She leapt forward as she screamed the last word, brandishing her wand. Rianne idly flicked out a hand, catching her by the collar of her robes.

"Now boys." she smiled. "As you can see, I can hold her back. Just. But if I were to accidentally let go..." She loosened her grip a little, and the hissing, spitting Fury that was Deanna Tyler snarled and leapt towards them a little. "You get my point. Now why don't you just run along before she slips out of my grasp, eh? Get yourself a nice head start."

Draco looked from one to the other, glaring. Then, beckoning to Crabbe and Goyle, he turned on his heel and stalked off, defeated for now but surely planning revenge.

As the three Slytherins walked off, Deanna calmed down and, on being released from Rianne's grip, turned to her, grinning broadly.

"Ri, what's funnier, the way they run or the looks on their faces?"

"I just like the power trip." said Rianne amiably. She examined the diary. "So what is this anyway?"

"It's mine." said Harry quickly. "I found it a few weeks ago."

Rianne was about to reply, when she felt Ginny tugging urgently at her sleeve.

"Please Rianne, if he found it, surely we should hand it in?" said the wide-eyed first year, apparently terrified its owner might return for it.

"She's got a point." Deanna put in. "We should really hand it in. The owner might be looking for it."

"Maybe." murmured Rianne. "Whose is it, anyway?" She flicked it open and frowned. T. M. Riddle? There wasn't anyone of that name in Hogwarts, was there? She passed it to Deanna. "Here, Tyler, check this out. Any idea who that is?"

Deanna took it from her and read. And then a strange thing happened. As she read it, her eyes widened and a look of horror spread across her face. Immediately, she snapped the book shut.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded, turning on Harry.

"I told you. I just found it!" Harry protested. "Lu was there when I picked it up, she'll tell you! Ask her!"

"Count on it, I will." said Deanna grimly. She turned to Rianne. "Come on. We've got to find Lu and Marls, and quickly."

"Don't I get my diary back?" Harry snapped.

"No, Harry, you don't." said Deanna. She relaxed a little, the alarm fading. "Look Harry, I can't explain why, but I can't let you have this book back. I'm sorry, but there it is. Come on, Ri." She turned and started walking away. Puzzled, Rianne followed her. How could a simple name in a book make Deanna so frightened? She looked as shaken as if she'd just heard You-Know-Who was coming back. That thought almost brought Rianne to a halt. A single name that could inspire terror like no other... But no. It couldn't be, could it? A sense of foreboding rising up her spine, Rianne quickened her pace. Time to find Luella, and quickly.

Chapter Nineteen The Enemies of the Heir

"So what's the emergency then?" asked Marlie, puzzled. Deanna had burst in to Herbology, dragged both Marlie and Luella aside and whispered urgently to them that they had to go back to the dorm as soon as the lesson finished. She'd refused to be drawn on why, and Rianne hadn't been much help either. She'd just told them that it wasn't wise to say anything in public, and that they'd be able to hear all about it later.

So it was that all four of them were locked in their dorm, huddled round the fire, waiting expectantly to hear what Deanna had to say.

She opened her bag and began fumbling around. After a few minutes spent searching around, she produced the diary.

"What do you lot make of this?"

Marlie took it from her. "Looks ordinary enough to me."

Deanna laughed. "To you, maybe. Give it to Lu. See what she thinks."

Marlie, now really confused, handed the diary to Luella, equally bemused. She ran a finger along the spine, raising an eyebrow at the date, but otherwise making no comment. Until she opened the diary. As she scanned the blank pages, the blood drained out of her face and her eyes widened in horror. Shuddering, she thrust the diary away from her.

Rianne was by her side in a second. "Lu! What's wrong? Are you alright?"

Luella gasped for breath, literally having to force the words out. "That... thing... it's... evil!"

"It's just an old diary, Lu." Marlie snorted.

"It isn't." came Deanna's voice. "Lu knows it, and if your mum believed in not keeping things hidden from children as much as mine does, you'd know it too. Check out the name."

Marlie picked it up and read. "T. M. Riddle. Never heard of them."

"Not under that name. But the whole magical world knows his alias." Deanna took in a deep breath, readying herself for the next announcement. "T. M. Riddle is Voldemort."

Marlie immediately thrust the diary away. "What?" she shrieked. "That's impossible!"

"You-Know-Who - Deanna, are you sure?" gasped Rianne.

Deanna nodded. "Quite sure. Mum told me. I asked her once who Voldemort was, where he'd come from, and she told me the whole story. He was born Tom Marvolo Riddle, son of a wealthy Muggle and a witch who was living in poverty in his village, preferring that to living with her own family. They got married, but she didn't tell him she was a witch until afterwards, when she was pregnant with their first born son. Needless to say, he threw her out. She died soon after in childbirth, but lived long enough to name him Tom for his father and Marvolo for hers." Deanna smiled in the firelight, an odd, twisted little smile with no humour in it. "Her name was Messalina Malfoy."

"Malfoy?" Marlie gaped. "You mean Voldie's a Malfoy?"

"Why am I not surprised?" sighed Rianne. "What amazes me is that he's a half-blood. You live and learn."

"Of course he's a half-blood." whispered Luella. "He's the First Heir, he has to be at least part Muggle."

"But he hates Muggles." said Marlie, bewildered.

"Exactly." said Deanna. "His Muggle father abandoned him, and the Muggle orphanage where he grew up apparently wasn't a lot of fun. Why would he like Muggles?"

Marlie wasn't to be put off. "But Harry Potter was brought up by Muggles who ill-treated him too, and he's not evil."

"He's also not half-Malfoy." Deanna reminded her.

"Messalina couldn't have been all bad - she liked Muggles enough to marry one, and it sounds like she didn't get on with the rest of the family." said Rianne thoughtfully.

"Exactly." said Deanna firmly. "And look what the result was. That family can't even rebel against itself without causing trouble."

"Yes, well, never mind about his history." snapped Marlie. "Question is, what's his school diary doing here?"

"I don't know." Deanna replied. "But this I do know - no good will come of this."

"No good already has!" Luella whispered, still shaking in Rianne's arms. "That is what's causing the attacks! Someone's using it to access Voldemort's power and open the Chamber!"

Silence. None of them wanted to believe it. And yet, it made sense. Made so much sense. Only an Heir of Slytherin could open the Chamber, and the diary was the only thing meeting that description, aside from Luella herself. Denial was one option. But all four of them were too much the Slytherin to be able to take it.

"Gods." whispered Deanna. Marlie didn't say anything, just backed away whimpering.

Rianne, however, was staring at the diary, eyes gleaming with cold.

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean?" Deanna looked at her, worried.

"Maybe someone's not using it. Maybe it's using someone to do its dirty work. Maybe it's alive."

All four of them drew back. That was just disturbing enough to be true. Who knew what Voldemort had done to it? He was capable of anything and twisted enough to do it.

"That's it." Marlie choked. "It's going. I don't care how we get rid of it, but I am not spending the night in the same room as that... that thing!" She picked up the diary and prepared to throw it into the fire. At least, she did until Deanna grabbed her by the wrist just in time.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snarled at her friend.

"What d'you think I'm doing?" yelled Marlie. "I'm getting rid of it, of course. I mean it, Tyler. I am **not** having that thing anywhere near me any longer than I have to!"

"Well, I quite agree with you there, Marls." snapped Deanna. "But chucking it in the fire? What were you thinking of? It's a Dark object made by the worst Dark wizard out there, anything could have happened! You need to dispose of these things with great care and attention, you can't just throw them in the fire!"

"Well, what the hell do you suggest then!" raged Marlie.

That got her. Deanna seemed completely at a loss as to what to do.

"Er... Rianne? Any ideas?"

"Palm it off on to someone you don't like." Rianne said promptly.

"OK, and how about an ethical one, Ri? One that'll actually work."

"True." mused Rianne. "Suppose it's probably not a good idea to let Lockhart loose with something like this anyway, gods know what he'd do." She noticed Deanna and Marlie giving her a very odd look indeed. "What? Don't tell me you weren't thinking it too."

"We shall have to hand it in, you know." Luella's voice sounded small, sad and completely unsuited to someone her age. "Get it sorted out properly. We can't risk it falling into the wrong hands. Can't risk any more attacks."

"Hand it in." said Deanna levelly. "OK. Right. Yes, I'm sure that'll work brilliantly. I can just imagine one of the teachers just taking it off us without a second thought or asking us any questions, can't you? 'What's that, Deanna? Lord Voldemort's incredibly evil school diary? OK, I'll dispose of it for you. No problem.' Honestly, Lu, we're going to end up in front of the Headmaster in no time with a story like that."

"Don't suppose our mothers are going to be any good either, are they?" sighed Marlie. "Don't know about yours, but mine is going to have a few words to say to me if I send her that in the post. Not unless I can talk her into having an amnesty on Dark objects at work or something, but I think she might suspect something."

Rianne slammed her fist into her hand. "That's it!"

Marlie blinked. "What, talk my mum into declaring an amnesty on Dark objects? Ri, you're asking an awful lot here."

Rianne shook her head. "No, no. But there is someone who could get rid of it for us, someone who'll believe us."

"Who?" Deanna leapt at the chance to solve their problems.

"Snape, of course. He likes us. He'll believe us. He won't do anything like automatically report us to Dumbledore. And he's mates with your mothers, isn't he? He can pass it on your mum, Marlie, make up some story about how he got it, and she can then dispose of it properly. Problem solved!" Rianne leant back, grinning smugly.

The other three exchanged looks.

"I'm not sure about this." said Marlie doubtfully. "He might still ask lots of probing questions."

"But on the other hand, what other choice do we have?" sighed Deanna. "I don't want this thing hanging around here!"

"I say we do it." said Luella firmly. "I'll do the talking; I've discussed the possibility of what might be causing the attacks before with him. He won't be suspicious if I tell him I found it. Which I sort of did."

"Yeah, where did it come from anyway?" Deanna asked curiously. "Harry said he just found it lying around, and you were there at the time."

"It's true." Luella confirmed. "He wanted to ask me about the Heir of Slytherin legends so we went to Moaning Myrtle's toilet to talk in private, and he found it lying on the floor. When he said it was blank, I told him to keep it. Damn it, why didn't I check it out! Why?" Luella cursed her own stupidity.

"Never mind, Lu." Rianne patted her shoulder. "We know now. And it's not like there's been any attacks since. We'll just take it to Snape tonight, after dinner, hand it in, and everything'll be fine. Don't worry. Everything'll be just fine."

"I hope so." Luella whispered. "I really do hope so."

Deanna checked her watch. "Well, nearly dinner time, folks. Snape may well not be in over dinner, so what do we do with this thing until then? And might I just state that I'm not happy about carrying it around with me? Especially not with Malfoy around who has seen it and is now itching to get his hands on it."

"Well we can't leave it here." said Marlie. "Not unattended - anyone could walk right in and take it."

"They wouldn't." Deanna fingered her wand. "I didn't spend four years building a reputation as a violent, unpredictable psychopath for nothing. Trust me, we could leave the entire Tal-y-Rhys fortune in that common room, and if it were widely known that it belonged to me, no one'd touch it. No one with any sense'll come in here."

"Maybe." said Marlie dubiously, not sharing Deanna's confidence. "But I don't want to risk it."

Rianne picked up her own wand. "Leave it to me. *Wingardium Leviosa!*" She pointed her wand at a loose flagstone, which promptly rose about a foot in the air to reveal a small hollow just big enough to contain the diary. A few flicks of the wand later, and the flagstone was back in place, looking as if it had never been disturbed. Except with one important difference - this time, the little black book was entombed beneath it.

"Ingenious." breathed Marlie.

"Indeed. Except you've forgotten one thing." Deanna pointed out. "Anyone could get that off with a Levitation Charm, couldn't they?"

"Not," Rianne replied coldly, "if you use one of your Amazing Patented Rock Classic Tyler Locking Charms, they won't."

"Yeah, go on Tyler, you're always saying how secure they are." Marlie chimed in. "Let's see one."

"You reckon." Deanna smiled thinly.

"Look at it this way." Luella pointed out. "Malfoy and friends'll spend hours trying to work out how to get it open. They're not going to know any Muggle tunes, are they?"

"No, suppose not." Deanna stroked her chin thoughtfully. "Alright, which one shall I use?"

"Hey Jude."

"Chain Reaction."

"Ride On Time."

Deanna sighed. Why, why, did her friends have to have such weird musical tastes? Rianne listened to the same records her mother did, Luella had this weird and quite frankly disturbing penchant for dance tunes, and as for Marlie, well. Her collection could keep the London Astoria's Camp Attack night going for weeks.

"Out of all that lot, Rianne's is perhaps the least sad, but if you think I'm using any, you've got another think coming." She rolled up her sleeves. "I shall use Enter Sandman. Excuse me."

Murmuring a few words, she wove a pattern of light over the flagstone, sealing it down, before shouting "*Aromohola!*" and deftly tapping out the introduction to Enter Sandman. The light flared then vanished.

"Done." smiled Deanna, satisfied. "Let's see anyone get past that! Come on, you guys. Dinner."

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Ginny hastily dived round the corner as the four girls approached the door. It wouldn't do to get caught, not now, not when she was so close. Holding her breath in sheer terror, she listened as the dorm's occupants left for dinner, securely locking the door behind them.

Slowly, far too slowly, their footsteps echoed down the corridor, growing ever fainter. Finally, several eternities later, they disappeared. Ginny left her hiding place and made straight for the door. It didn't take long before it was open. Six months of life in the Slytherin common room had given Ginny more than a passing acquaintance with Muggle music, and the opening bars of Hey Jude were familiar enough. Besides, Rianne nearly always used that one when it was her turn to set the dorm combination lock, when she didn't use something by Fleetwood Mac anyway. The things you learned when you hung around these people for long enough.

As she entered the dorm, she felt a twinge of guilt about what she was doing. They'd done so much for her after all. And here she was, repaying them by robbing them. It didn't take much to imagine how Deanna would react upon discovering someone had taken her stuff. Yet it wasn't really theirs, was it? And she couldn't let them keep it, much less hand it in. If Snape got his hands on it, it wouldn't be long before he managed to unlock its secrets, and after that, it would only be a matter of time before

he discovered who its previous owner had been. She couldn't risk that. If her parents had been disappointed in her before, they'd be ready to disown her if it got out she'd been attacking Muggle-borns. She knew Tom well enough to know that he'd be unlikely to tell Snape what had really been going on. No, there was no help for it. She just had to get that diary back.

Question was, which flagstone was it under? Near the fire, she knew that much. But peering through a knot hole as she had been, she hadn't had the best view in the world. Only one thing for it.

"*Sensor Incantatem!*" she whispered, holding her wand out, running it over the stones. At first, the wand remained silent. Until she moved it over one stone in particular, and it started to glow, producing the illusion of a padlock, which floated in the air before disappearing.

"Got you!" Dropping to her knees, she examined it closely. The spell had revealed a network of magical bonds holding it firmly in place. The Alohomora Charm would release it, but not without a combination. Enter Sandman, hadn't it been? She tapped out the chorus as best she could.

And found herself flung back across the floor as the charm screamed in protest. Not the right bit evidently, either that or she'd tapped it wrong. And yet she could have sworn that was how it went. Frowning, she reached for Marlie's Walkmage, left lying carelessly by her bed, before hastily going through Deanna's record collection.

Before long, the Black Album was playing away. Maybe it was the intro she'd used, Ginny thought. She played it a few times just to be sure, before tapping it out onto the stone.

Success! The Locking Charm glowed, rippled and changed to pale green before her eyes. Ginny rubbed her hands gleefully. Two elementary charms later, and the diary was cradled in her arms once more. Replacing the flagstone, she got swiftly to her feet, pausing only to return the Walkmage to its place by the bed. Then, diary hidden beneath her robes, she made a hasty exit.

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"Come on then. Let's get this over with." Deanna sighed as she pushed the door open. "Which stone was it under?"

"This one." replied Rianne, striding straight over to the stone she'd earlier hidden the diary under and patting it, confident she'd found the right one.

"Right." Deanna knelt by it and tapped out the code. They waited. Nothing happened.

Deanna frowned. "That's odd." She tried again. Still nothing.

"Maybe you did it wrong." Marlie suggested.

Deanna glared at her. "I did not do it wrong! That's the code, exactly as I tapped it in!"

"Maybe it's the wrong stone." Luella said timidly.

"Of course it's the right one. It was this one, I swear it." snapped Rianne.

Deanna got up. "*Sensor Incantatem!*" She began sweeping her wand over the floor, trying to seek out the enchanted stone. Nothing.

"It has to be round here somewhere!" she muttered, unable to figure out what had gone wrong. "Come on, where are you, you little bastard..."

Rianne was still staring at the first stone she tried. "I'm still sure it was this one." she whispered.

"So what happened to the charm then?" asked Marlie.

"I don't know." said Rianne. "Unless..." A horrible suspicion began to dawn on her. Raising her wand, she cast a charm on the stone. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The stone rose steadily into the air. Deanna stopped dowsing and joined the rest of them as they peered into the cavity left behind. Sure enough, the hollow was still there. But no diary.

"We've been robbed." whispered Deanna.

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Half an hour later, and it still hadn't sunk in.

"Who?" Deanna hissed, feeling personally attacked that someone had dared break in to their dorm and even worse, circumvented her security charms. "Who would dare do a thing like this?"

"Easy enough." laughed Rianne bitterly. "Malfoy. Got to be. He knew we had the diary, wanted a look, so broke in while we were at dinner. Damn him."

Luella looked dubious. "I'm not sure. I mean, yeah it could have been, but someone would have noticed him hanging about, surely?"

"OK, so he sent Pansy Parkinson in to do it for him." said Rianne dismissively. "But the fact remains he's still the number one suspect."

"But how'd they get past the charm?" Luella frowned.

"They must have heard me saying what I was going to use." Deanna sighed. "Damn it. And Malfoy was there when we got the Firebolts too. When we explained to Ginny how the charms worked. Gods damn it!" She pounded her hand in frustration.

"At least he doesn't seem to know what the diary really is." Rianne pointed out. "Or how to use it."

"He doesn't need to know how to use it." snarled Deanna. "All that has to happen is for it to use him."

"Don't." Marlie shuddered. "That's all we need, Lord Voldemort using Malfoy as a tool. The school'd be Muggle-born free in weeks. Less, even."

"That does it." said Rianne. "We've got to get that diary back. Before it's too late."

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Which was why the following day found Draco Malfoy ambushed on the way to his History of Magic lesson, dragged into a side corridor and thrust up against the wall.

"Where is it?" snarled Deanna. "What have you done with it?"

"Done with what?" yelled Draco. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't give me that!" she hissed, tightening her grip. "What the hell did you do with that diary?"

"What diary?" asked Draco, genuinely perplexed.

"You know exactly what diary!" Deanna hissed. "The one you tried to take off Harry yesterday!"

"Oh!" Draco began to grin. "That diary!"

"Yes, that diary! Where is it?!"

Draco shrugged. "Haven't the foggiest, Tyler. Why, lost it have we? Potter won't like that. Very careless of you, you know."

"Shut... up!" Deanna snapped, slamming him against the wall again. "I didn't lose it. It got stolen. Don't try and act the innocent with me, Malfoy! I know it was you!"

Draco just rolled his eyes, and turned to his cousin, who was leaning against the opposite wall, watching proceedings with interest. "Lovegood, kindly talk some sense into your friend here. She seems to have this paranoid delusion that I'm obsessed with her belongings and always up to no good."

"Wonder where she got that idea from." observed Marlie.

"No idea, Lovegood." said Draco innocently. "I'd never do anything like that."

"Liar." snarled Deanna. "Malfoy, just cut the crap and hand it over. I'm not going anywhere without it."

"You could be here a while then." Draco commented. "Still, if you really *want* to spend that much time in such close proximity to me..." He let the sentence trail off, leering at her. Deanna backed away in revulsion, but did not let him go.

"Marlie. Just sort this out once and for all. Is he lying, or has hell finally frozen over?"

Marlie fingered her Snitch necklace. "Malfoy, did you steal the diary?"

"No." snapped Draco, his patience starting to wear thin. "I didn't. Happy now?"

Marlie nodded sadly. "He's telling the truth, DT. You'd better let him go."

Deanna released him, too stunned to argue. Draco straightened his robes.

"Thank you, Lovegood. And now you've finished harassing me, can I go? I do have a lesson to get to, after all."

"I'm not stopping you." Deanna retorted, more in bitterness and frustration than anger. Draco just smirked at her, before stalking off. However, he couldn't resist flinging one last insult at her.

"Like I'd want anything of yours anyway!" he jeered, before turning away and disappearing.

"Arsehole." Deanna muttered, turning to Marlie. "So now what?" Marlie didn't answer. "Marls?"

"What?" asked Marlie absently. She was staring at the space where Draco had been before swaggering off, frowning and fingering her necklace.

"I said, now what do we do?" Deanna repeated. "Marls, what are you thinking?"

"Doesn't matter." said Marlie hastily, dropping the necklace and turning on the charm. "Just trying to figure out why Malfoy's such a git."

"Get anywhere?" asked Deanna.

Marlie shook her head. "No."

"There's a surprise. Come on then, we'd better go and find Lu and Ri. Let them know what we found out."

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"Not Malfoy?" Rianne could hardly believe her ears. "But... who was it then?"

Marlie shrugged. "Don't know. But there it is. I asked him straight out. He denied it. And the necklace said he was telling the truth. It's not him, Ri. I'd swear to it."

"The necklace could be wrong." Rianne suggested. Marlie's eyes narrowed.

"My necklace is *never* wrong." she snapped.

"OK, OK." said Rianne hastily. "So if not Malfoy, who? Who else even knew about the diary?"

"Harry." said Deanna. "He was there when we got it."

Rianne shook her head. "Nah. Has to be a Slytherin - no one else knows our password. Who else was there?"

Deanna thought. "Well, Ginny and her friends were there, but it wouldn't have been one of them, surely?"

"Ginny wouldn't do a thing like that." stated Marlie. "She's not a thief."

"Who does that leave then?" asked Rianne.

"No one." sighed Deanna. "Not unless the diary teleported itself out of there somehow."

"Don't." shivered Marlie. "I don't want to think about that!"

"Well, there aren't very many other options left, are there?" Rianne snapped.

None of them had anything to say to that. Luella, however, was doing some very serious thinking. Something had occurred to her. Something she'd discussed with Snape before, but had since forgotten about.

"I need to find Ginny." she announced.

"Ginny? Whatever for?" Deanna asked in surprise.

"What, now?" gasped Marlie. "Lu, lessons are about to start, you'll get in trouble!"

"Never mind! This is far more important!" Luella yelled over her shoulder as she took off down the corridor.

The other three watched her go.

"What has she thought of now?" sighed Rianne.

Deanna shook her head. "I don't know, but I really wish she'd share these brainwaves of hers with us before she goes running off. It's very annoying."

Marlie watched after her anxiously. "Do you reckon we should go after her? Keep her out of trouble, like?"

Rianne checked her watch. "We'll be late."

"Rianne, we've got Herbology next. Sprout's usually pretty lenient about that sort of thing, most that'll happen is that we lose a few points." Deanna beckoned them both after her. "Let's go."

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Luella raced down the corridors, mind on fire with possibility. Ginny had been there when Deanna had confiscated the diary. Ginny knew how Deanna's Locking Charms worked. She was familiar with the tunes the four of them used to secure the dorm door with. As a female Slytherin, she would have been able to eavesdrop without looking too suspicious. And then there was that morning back in January, when Luella had felt Ginny fight off an attack. There was far more to this young first year than met the eye. And while Luella had no doubt that Ginny was no Dark witch, nevertheless there were some serious questions to be answered, and Luella had a feeling that Ginny might hold some of the answers.

Now, what class did Ginny have first thing on a Tuesday? Transfiguration, wasn't it? She headed for McGonagall's classroom, all the while keeping an eye out for the first year.

And then she saw her. A glimpse of red hair walking down a side corridor. Luella ran after her, shouting her name. "Ginny!"

The girl turned round a corner and disappeared from view. And then Luella heard it, a voice that made her blood run cold.

"Let me rip.... let me tear.... I hunger.... I want blood..." She'd never heard a voice like it in her life. Cold, cruel and utterly inhuman, it was surely the voice of some kind of monster. A monster that could be causing the attacks... And then all doubts were removed as the familiar pain ripped through her arm, causing her to double up. But not for long. It was surprising what you could put up with when someone you cared about was in danger.

"Oh my god... *Ginny, watch out!*" Luella screamed, breaking into a sprint. Rounding the corner, she drew her wand out, ready to do battle.

And stopped. No monster. No Ginny. No pain in her arm. The corridor was empty. Almost empty. Except for a figure lying crumpled in the middle of the floor. It didn't have red hair.

Slowly, keeping an eye out for any sign of movement, Luella approached the figure. It was a girl, wearing Hogwarts robes with the blue and bronze trim that signified Ravenclaw. As Luella drew nearer, she cast all caution to the wind as she recognised the victim.

"Oh god. Oh no." she wept, racing to the fallen girl's side. "Dear god, no, Penny, not you." Luella buried her face her hands and sobbed helplessly.

For it was indeed none other than Penelope Clearwater, lying Petrified on her back, glasses cast to one side, a cleaning cloth in her other hand, evidently caught in the act of polishing the lenses.

"Not you, cous. Not you." Luella whispered, stroking her cousin's hair. "Whoever did this will pay for this, I swear. I swear it, Penny!"

She heard footsteps behind her. Snatching up her wand, she spun round. And froze in horror as she came face to face with a stunned Professor McGonagall.

"What happened here?" the teacher whispered, shocked.

"Professor, I swear I didn't do it, I just found her like this, I promise!" Luella gasped, terrified beyond measure. If Harry Potter had been under suspicion after getting found at the scene, how much worse was it going to be for her, a Slytherin?

McGonagall appeared to gather her wits. Striding forward, she grabbed Luella by the arm and hauled her to her feet.

"Come along. We need to see the Headmaster about this." Ignoring Luella's protestations, she dragged the girl away.

It was at this point that Deanna, Marlie and Rianne arrived on the scene.

"What the...?" gasped Rianne. "Professor, what on earth's going on?"

Deanna took in Luella's pale, tear-stained face. "Lu, what the hell happened?"

"There's been another attack." McGonagall informed them. "And your friend here was found at the scene. I'm taking her to see the Headmaster now."

"What?" gasped Marlie. "Another attack?" She peered around McGonagall. "Oh my god, Penny!" She rushed to her cousin's side, cradling her head in her lap.

"But she didn't do it! She couldn't have!" Deanna cried.

"Professor, she was talking to us not ten minutes ago and then went off to look for Ginny Weasley. It wasn't her, it couldn't have been." Rianne protested.

"Be that as it may, the Headmaster will have to be informed." McGonagall told them sternly. "And I am taking Miss Martin there right now. As for you three, don't you have lessons to go to?"

"What about Penelope?" said Marlie quietly, not taking her eyes off her cousin.

McGonagall conjured up a stretcher and levitated the Ravenclaw on to it. The stretcher then moved away without a sound.

"She's on her way to the hospital wing now. Madam Pomfrey will take care of her. Now I'll say it again. Get to your lessons. I will deal with this." She led Luella away.

The three girls watched her go. Deanna turned to Rianne in horror.

"But she's innocent! She couldn't have done it, she couldn't have!" Deanna gasped, even paler than usual. "They can't expel her, surely!"

Marlie got to her feet. "Dumbledore's not a god, Deanna. If he's persuaded she did it, she'll be out of here."

"No." whispered Deanna. "They can't. They won't. Not Lu, not my best mate, they can't! They just can't!" She choked on the last words, wiping the tears away.

"They won't." said Rianne, decisive as ever. "Come on. We've got to find Snape and fast."

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Luella didn't say a word as McGonagall led her through the passageways of Hogwarts. I'm expelled, she thought. I'm going to be packing my bags for the next train home. My parents are going to kill me. God knows what it'll do to Deanna. And as for Snape... She didn't even want to think about how he'd react. He'd said that there was only one thing that'd ever make him turn from her - the "deliberate and wanton betrayal of everything he'd ever taught her." She hung her head in misery. Oh, how he was going to love this...

"Sherbert Lemon!" snapped McGonagall as she halted outside a stone gargoyle. Luella blinked in amazement as it leapt to one side and saluted, revealing a narrow passageway leading upwards. Luella supposed that this must be the way to Dumbledore's office. She was feeling too terrified to be impressed though.

The passageway came to an end outside a wooden door. McGonagall knocked. From inside, Luella heard Professor Dumbledore answer. "Come in."

Dumbledore looked up and raised an eyebrow to see Luella there. However, he didn't say anything.

"Professor, I..." McGonagall hesitated, before shrugging and jumping in. "There... There's been another attack."

Luella had expected him to leap to his feet in horror, to look worried or frightened. It was what she'd have expected Snape to do. Dumbledore however just bowed his head in resignation, almost as if he'd expected something like this to happen.

"Who?" he asked.

"Penelope Clearwater. Fifth year Ravenclaw." McGonagall took a deep breath, preparing for her next announcement. "And... I found this young Slytherin at the scene." Luella winced at the way she'd said 'Slytherin'. The deputy Headmistress had sounded oddly like Snape sneering at a misbehaving Gryffindor. Luella shivered. Professor Snape, where are you? she thought unhappily.

Dumbledore didn't respond. He fixed McGonagall with those enigmatic blue eyes of his, looking at her over his glasses.

"And?"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" snapped McGonagall.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, apparently unbothered by these revelations.

"I haven't the foggiest idea, my dear Professor McGonagall. What do you think I should do?"

That threw her. McGonagall's mouth opened and closed, words failing her. Luella suppressed the urge to smile. Headmasters weren't supposed to act like this, but she wasn't complaining. Any deviation from the expected script of "GET OUT OF MY SCHOOL AND NEVER DARKEN ITS DOOR AGAIN!" had to be a good thing.

And then the cavalry arrived. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and the door burst open to admit Professor Snape, robes billowing, on fire with righteous anger, emotions rallied to defend his threatened protégée.

"Headmaster, what is going on here?" he snarled. "Surely you don't believe that this child is responsible for Petrifying her fellow pupils?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Severus! Have people really been saying that?"

"Someone obviously has." Snape shot back. "Or she'd be in lessons, where she's meant to be. Is that not right, Minerva?" He rounded on the Head of Gryffindor, daring her to explain herself.

McGonagall, to her credit, refused to be cowed. "Severus, there has been another attack. Miss Martin was found at the scene."

"So I heard." said Snape coldly. "I just got dragged out of a lesson by three hysterical Slytherins telling me she was about to be expelled and I had to do something. Headmaster, I do hope this isn't true."

"Expelled? My dear Severus, I hadn't even considered the possibility. Do *you* think she should be expelled?" Dumbledore leaned forward earnestly.

"Well, of course not!" snapped Severus in exasperation. "She's done nothing wrong!"

"Severus, she was on the scene!" shouted McGonagall. "I found her stooped over the girl's body with her wand in hand. Now, innocent or not, some explanation is surely required. She might be a favourite of yours, but that doesn't mean she's incapable of doing anything wrong!"

Snape dismissed her words with a wave of the hand. "It proves nothing. Of course she had her wand out - don't tell me you've not been walking around the school with your

hand on your wand lately. She could have just arrived and been checking the girl was alright. Did you actually see her Petrify her?"

"Well... no." McGonagall admitted.

"Exactly." Snape folded his arms, affecting an air of righteous indignation. "Honestly, all it takes is for one Slytherin to be found in a mildly compromising position and you're frogmarching her off to the Headmaster. I really don't believe you sometimes, Minerva."

McGonagall opened her mouth to snap something rather nasty back at him, but was prevented from doing so by Dumbledore motioning for silence.

"Aren't you two forgetting something in all of this?"

The two teachers turned to look at him quizzically.

"Just that there is one person whose opinion you have yet to ask." said Dumbledore mildly.

"Who would that be then?" snapped McGonagall.

"Why, Miss Martin of course." smiled Dumbledore. "Here you both are arguing over whether she was involved or not, and yet neither of you have thought to ask her if she actually did it."

McGonagall looked uncomprehendingly at him, as if the concept of students admitting to misdeeds voluntarily was a new one to her. To be fair to her, it wasn't a common occurrence, especially where Slytherins were concerned.

Snape, however, was beginning to smile. "How remiss of us, Headmaster. We do apologise. Why don't you ask her yourself? Get the matter sorted out once and for all."

"Certainly, Severus." He leaned forward, placing both elbows on the desk, addressing Luella directly for the first time. While he wasn't exactly smiling, nevertheless his manner was not unkind. "Miss Martin, were you responsible for the attack on Miss Clearwater?"

"No." whispered Luella. "What about the attacks on Mr. Finch-Fletchley, Mr. Creevey and Mrs. Norris?"

Luella shook her head. "No. No, it wasn't me. I don't know who it was."

Dumbledore leaned back, satisfied. "Thank you, Miss Martin. Severus, are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly, Headmaster."

"And you, Minerva?" Dumbledore gazed intently at her. McGonagall's mouth opened and closed a few times before setting in a firm line.

"I suppose I shall have to be," she sniffed. "If you aren't even going to try and investigate. Severus, I leave her to you. Good day." She turned on her heel and swept out. As soon as the door closed, Severus raced to Luella's side.

"Miss Martin, are you alright?" His voice was level, but his eyes burned with concern, betraying his real feelings to anyone who cared to look.

"I'm fine," Luella whispered. "Thank you." She squeezed the hand that was clutching the arm of her chair. Severus smiled thinly, patting her shoulder. However, his eyes told another story - that she was not out of danger just yet. He turned away from her to address the Headmaster.

"Albus, she is not under suspicion, is she?"

Dumbledore finally allowed himself a smile. "No, Severus, she is not. Rest assured that Miss Martin will be with us a little while longer. I'm not one to jump to conclusions at the mere sight of a Slytherin in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Severus said, breathing a sigh of relief. He turned back to Luella, extending a hand to her. "Come, Miss Martin. Let's get you back to your common room. Your friends will be worried about you." He led Luella out of Dumbledore's office.

Once on the stairs outside, Severus cast off all pretence at keeping his emotions under control, spinning round and grabbing Luella by the shoulders.

"What the hell were you thinking of?" he snarled at her. "Running off on your own, when you were *meant* to be in lessons I might add, with the current situation regarding Muggle-borns being what it is, especially you being who you are, anything could have happened to you, it could have been you lying Petrified in the hospital wing, you could have been expelled or worse..." He choked on the last word, releasing her and turning away, his face in shadow. "Please don't do that again," he whispered. "Don't take any risks like that, don't put yourself in danger. You're too valuable, we need you, you're far too important to lose to some random accident. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded mutely, too struck by his obvious concern to snap at him.

"Good." He stepped forward, re-emerging into the torchlight. To her surprise, he was smiling once more, although the strain in his eyes was obvious. "You had me worried for a while there. Deanna and your friends came bursting into my lesson all shouting at once, telling me you'd been caught attacking students, were going to be expelled, and gods know what else. I didn't know what to think. But you are alright now."

"I'm fine," Luella reassured him. "Sir, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you through all that. But I had this hunch to follow up, and then I heard this voice wanting to kill

something, so I ran after it, and found Penny lying there. Then McGonagall found me and thought I'd done it. Thanks for sticking up for me."

"No trouble. I'm getting rather used to it now." came the dry response. "Being the twenty four hour non-stop support service for troubled Slytherins becomes second nature after a while. Besides it's not often I get to put one over Minerva McGonagall." He became serious. "Well-intentioned though they might be, your friends appear to have complicated matters. The whole Gryffindor and Ravenclaw first year now know there's been another attack and that you were found there. I shall have to have words with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, see if we can't halt the worst of the rumours. And I'm sure Dumbledore will have to make some kind of announcement. However, there's no getting around the fact that your life is going to become incredibly difficult over the next few weeks. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"I think so." Luella replied. "I can always use Glamoury, keep unnoticed. I'm used to it, trust me. My biggest problem will be preventing Deanna from attacking anyone who says anything."

"True enough." laughed Snape. "Just like her mother, that one. Yes, please try and keep her out of trouble. We don't need her adding to Madam Pomfrey's troubles. Which brings me to another point. From now on, you are going to have to be impeccably behaved. Get your work done on time and to the best standard you possibly can. Don't break even the most minor of school rules. You need to keep your record clean, try and be as unobtrusive as possible. Give your enemies nothing to pick up on. And at the other extreme, don't go out of your way to get points or otherwise distinguish yourself. You don't want to be noticed at all if you can help it. Got that?"

"Understood." Luella nodded. "Besides, like I said before, it's what I've always done anyway."

"Good." He patted her on the shoulder. "The practice should come in useful. I think you will come through it just fine, but don't think it will be easy. If you need me, for any reason at all, come and find me. I'm here for you, Luella. Remember that." His eyes burned into hers. I always do, she thought, feeling herself going weak at the knees.

It was Snape who broke the contact first. "You had best go back to your common room. I'll take you back there myself. Your friends are already there. Don't worry about missing your lesson, I'll tell Professor Sprout what happened."

"Thank you, sir." Luella murmured as she followed him back to the Nest. However, despite his reassuring presence, her fear would not go away. That voice she'd heard was still slithering in her ears. She didn't think she'd forget it in a hurry. Especially knowing that its owner was still lurking in the school somewhere. And that the cousin she cared about had been its most recent victim. Above and beyond all that, however, was a strange feeling of foreboding, that although she'd been cleared, something still loomed over the horizon. That despite everything, the worst was yet to come.

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Much as Snape had predicted, the Gryffindor common room was abuzz with rumours. The first years had rushed in from Potions all talking at once about how there'd been another attack and this time, a prime suspect.

"They caught someone? Who?" asked Fred curiously, overhearing a wide-eyed Marianne Johnson telling her sister all about it.

"One of the Slytherins!" the first year whispered. "Three of them came rushing into Potions telling Professor Snape that one of them had been caught at the scene and was going to be expelled. You should have seen Professor Snape's reaction, he was off at once. Don't think I've ever seen him move so fast."

"And you got the lesson off!" laughed Angelina. "Nice one, sis!"

Marianne pulled a face. "Not really. He just told us all to stay in the classroom until he got back. Twenty minutes later, he turned up again and got on with teaching as if nothing had happened."

"Never mind." Angelina comforted her. "Maybe next time."

"Yeah, but you still haven't told us who it was." Fred pointed out.

The first year thought for a bit. "Erm... I didn't catch her name. But it was one of those fourth years you're always hanging around with. Lila, Layla, something like that."

"Luella?" Fred suggested.

"That's it!" Marianne snapped her fingers. "Luella. Knew it was something unusual. Yeah, that's her."

Fred blinked in confusion. Luella Martin? The Heir of Slytherin? Somehow he doubted it. Frowning, he walked over to where his brother was sitting and filled him in on this latest news.

"Lu Martin?" George stared at him. "But she IS Muggle-born, why on earth would she want to attack them?"

"That's what I want to know." said Fred firmly. "Come on, let's go and find Marls. See what's really going on."

The twins slipped out unnoticed. A few minutes later, Harry, Ron and Hermione turned up, desperate for news.

Normally Hermione didn't have much to do with her dorm mates. The constant gossiping about boys, clothes and make-up left her cold and unfulfilled. However, there were some occasions when gossiping was necessary.

"Lavender, what's going on?" Hermione gasped. "Everyone's saying there's been another attack. What happened?"

"Haven't you heard yet?" Lavender purred. "They say they've caught the Heir red-handed."

"Red-handed?" Both boys pulled up chairs so they could listen in.

"Who was it?" asked Ron, enthralled. "Have they been expelled yet?"

"Who was being attacked?" asked Harry anxiously. "Are they OK?"

"Penelope Clearwater." Parvati told them. "Ravenclaw fifth year. She's in the hospital wing with the others. Petrified but OK. But that's not the big news. Apparently the Heir of Slytherin was found stooped over her with her wand. They're expelling her now, so everyone says."

"Her?" asked Ron quietly.

"Yeah, her." Parvati nodded. "It was one of the Slytherin fourth years."

Next to Hermione, Harry felt his blood run cold. "Which one?" he croaked, barely managing to force the words out.

"Luella Martin." Lavender told them. Turning to Parvati, she added "They do always say it's the quiet ones you have to watch."

Harry didn't hear her. All he was aware of was the room starting to go blurry as his mind struggled to digest this information. Luella... the Heir of Slytherin? A Dark Witch? Attacking Muggle-borns? Expelled? It wasn't true. It couldn't be. His senses fought against what he was hearing. No way was Luella responsible for the attacks, he thought. It just wasn't possible. She must have been set up somehow. But that still left the very real possibility of her being expelled. That thought hit him harder than the idea of her turning evil. At least that was too surreal to make an impact. But the thought of losing Luella for good, of never seeing her again, that was all too horribly possible.

"No way." he whispered. "No way."

"Harry, I'm so sorry." Hermione said quietly, trying to comfort him.

"It's not true." Harry said, turning to face her, his voice rising to a scream. "It isn't true! Luella isn't the Heir of Slytherin, she just can't be! She can't!" He shouted the last sentence for the entire common room to hear.

"Well of course not." came the voice of George Weasley, cutting through the silence. "She can't be attacking Muggle-borns, she is one."

"Exactly, my dear George." said Fred as he followed his brother into the common room. "And if you'd all bothered to get your facts straight instead of believing every rumour you heard, you'd have all realised that."

Harry got to his feet and staggered gratefully over to them. "What... what happened?" he choked. "Is she OK?"

"She's fine." George grinned. "Not in trouble, cleared by Dumbledore himself, certainly not going to be expelled. So you can stop worrying, Harry."

"Thank god." Harry whispered. "So what did happen to her?"

"Well, Marls reckons she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was first on the scene, and had the bad luck to get found there by McGonagall. That's all." Fred looked meaningfully at his housemates.

"So she's not the Heir then?" asked Harry, relieved.

"No." said George.

"She didn't do it?" asked Hermione.

"No." said Fred, smiling.

"She's not expelled?" asked Ron, a trace of disappointment in his voice.

"No." said both twins together.

The Gryffindors nodded and returned to discussing other things, disappointed that the truth was so mundane.

Harry, relieved that Luella wasn't about to be expelled after all, sank into a chair.

"Thank god that's over." he sighed.

"I must say, I didn't think it could be true." Hermione observed, joining him. "A Muggle-born attacking other Muggle-borns - it just doesn't make sense. Does it, Ron? Ron?"

Ron had remained standing and was even now heading for the common room door.

"Ron, where are you off to?" Hermione called after him, puzzled.

"I won't be long." he answered. "There's just something I've got to do." Turning away, he left the room.

Hermione looked back at Harry. "Any idea where he's going?"

"No idea, Mione. He's not said anything to me."

"Too much to hope that he's going to be studying." Hermione sniffed, before reaching for her books. "Now, where were we? Ah yes, History of Magic, the 1612 Goblin Rebellion." Ignoring Harry's groans, she set to work.

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Outside Gryffindor Tower, Ron directed his footsteps downstairs, gritting his teeth in determination. This wasn't something he was looking forward to, and if Harry and Hermione ever found out where he was going, they'd probably disown him on the spot. However, he had little choice. Not now there'd been another attack. Knowing what he knew, he could hardly keep quiet now.

Yeah, but do you have to go to *him*, a little voice nagged at him. Stop it, he told himself. This is the only way to make sure Harry and Hermione never find me out. A feeble justification, he knew. Trying to convince himself he was trying to protect his friends as opposed to his reputation. But he didn't really have any other ideas. McGonagall would probably either dismiss his suspicions or be unable to act on them. After all, it certainly seemed that Snape and Dumbledore had been able to overrule her. However, even Dumbledore had to answer to the school governors.

Which is why he found himself heading for the dungeons, feeling sick to his stomach, but steeling himself for what he had to do anyway. Sometimes, you just had to make compromises.

He found his target quickly enough. The flash of silver-blond hair up ahead could belong to only one other, and it wasn't long enough to be hers. Ron slowed his pace, suddenly fearful, beginning to wonder if this was a good idea. Too late now. His target, hearing footsteps, had turned and seen him.

"Well, well, well." Draco Malfoy drawled. "Fancy that. Ron Weasley deigning to spend time down here with the likes of us. What's the matter, Gryff-boy, finally decided Slytherins are worthwhile human beings after all?" He stepped forward, Crabbe and Goyle close behind him, cracking their knuckles and glowering menacingly. Ron suddenly became very aware that he was alone, outnumbered and deep in Slytherin territory. However, he didn't chicken out.

"Cut it out, Malfoy." he snapped. "I need to talk to you. It's important."

"Important. I see." Draco looked unconvinced. "Ron Weasley has something important to tell me. Right."

Ron ignored the sarcasm. "It's about the Heir of Slytherin. I've got information on them."

Draco dropped the insolence at once, all ears about this. "Really?"

"Really." Ron nodded.

"How very interesting." Draco purred. "I'm intrigued. Go on then. Share your knowledge. And if it's sufficiently useful, I might even let you leave here unpunished."

Ron swallowed. "Alright. You'll be interested, I promise." Taking a deep breath, forcefully repressing the anguished protests of his conscience, he began to relate what he knew.

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Chapter Twenty The Heir Betrayed

"Well?" said Draco softly, his voice echoing round the small abandoned dungeon that they'd retreated to. "What do you know?"

"I don't have much." Ron admitted. "But I think I know who it is."

"Go on." Draco prodded. "Tell me."

Ron took a deep breath. "I think it's Luella Martin."

"Her!" Draco hissed. He exchanged looks with Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom were now gazing in ecstatic rapture. Ron looked from one to the other. A little frisson of some undescribable emotion that could have been delight, surprise, malice or any combination of the three had gone round the room as he'd said her name. Once more, those doubts as to the wisdom of this resurfaced, clouding the pleasure he'd felt at knowing that this idea was going to work.

"Yes, her." said Ron, wishing that unholy light in Draco's eyes would go out.

"But how..." said Draco in wonder. Awe gave way to animation. "Tell me how you found out! Tell me now!"

"Alright, alright." said Ron testily. And he began to relate his suspicions. How the three of them had found Luella at the scene of the first attack. How he'd overheard Rianne and Deanna discussing their fears that Luella was hiding something, implicated in some way, and that there was something up with her right arm. How they'd reacted with fury when he'd threatened to tell on them, as if there was some truth to the idea of Luella being the Heir. How Harry had guessed that she might be a Parselmouth. How Luella had appeared to suffer a burn on her arm during Potions while the attack on Justin Finch-Fletchley was going on - yet the potion she'd been working on didn't cause burns and was harmless to the skin. How Luella had seemed to know all about the legend of the Second Heir, despite being only a Muggle-born. And now she'd been caught virtually red-handed at the scene of the next attack.

The three Slytherins listened in silence, their faces becoming ever more ghoulish with each revelation. Finally Ron finished talking. There. It was done. Luella was surely on her way out of the school by now. One less Slytherin around, and he no longer had to worry about Harry getting taken advantage of. So why did this whole thing seem so wrong?

Draco was regarding him rather oddly. "Well now, Weasley, I won't say this hasn't been an interesting little conversation. You've given me some very useful information

here. However, there is one little thing that's still puzzling me, and you've not yet addressed it."

"What's that, Malfoy?" asked Ron halfheartedly, sickened by Draco so near to him and experiencing a strange urge to be gone somewhere far, far away where he could try and wash the taint off himself.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Draco asked. "I mean, we're not exactly friends, are we? And if you were acting purely out of concern that there's a Dark witch running loose around the school, you'd have gone to a teacher. But you came looking for me. And I want to know why."

Ron shrugged. "Your father's a governor. Dumbledore's obviously not going to kick her out, so I thought I'd better go to his boss. That's all."

"Really." Draco still looked incredibly calculating. "And your other reason being? Don't lie to me, Weasley, you still haven't told me all."

Ron hesitated. Draco could obviously sense the real reason behind this venture, and it didn't look like he was getting out of here without telling him. And yet, he was loath to reveal anything so personal to a sworn enemy.

"I've told you all you need to know." said Ron sharply. "You know who it is, you've got enough evidence to go on. Do what you have to, it's in your hands now. I'm going." He got to his feet and made to leave. However, he found his way blocked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Not so fast, Weasley." sneered Crabbe. "Malfoy's not finished with you yet."

"Yeah, he asked you a question, Gryff-boy." snarled Goyle. "And you ain't going nowhere until it gets answered."

"Get out of my way!" snapped Ron, trying to get past them. It was no use. He might as well have tried getting past a brick wall.

"Answer the question." hissed Crabbe, grabbing Ron by the front of his robes and forcing him up against the wall. "Before we have to beat it out of you."

Ron shot a glance at Draco. He was still sitting cross-legged on the floor, smiling a cold, malicious smile that indicated he had no intention of calling his bodyguards off. No hope of rescue there, not that Ron had really expected it. He fingered his wand. No hope there either. He'd be more likely to hurt himself than either of the Slytherins, unless they ended up laughing themselves to death.

"Alright." said Ron quietly. "Put me down and I'll tell you."

Draco picked himself up and joined his friends. "Oh, I think you can tell me equally well from where you are, don't you boys?" Crabbe and Goyle nodded in affirmation.

Ron gulped. No help but to admit it.

"What reason do I need?" said Ron coldly. "She's been attacking kids. The next one could die."

"And the rest?" said Draco softly.

Ron raised his head and looked Draco straight in the eyes. "Because you bastards have already stolen my sister, and now she's trying to get hold of my best mate too. I can't get rid of you all, but if I can save Harry from her, then I will. Is that what you wanted to hear, Malfoy?" He stared defiantly at the Slytherin. Draco was no longer smiling.

"So it is for such petty reasons that Ron Weasley turns traitor." he said quietly. He shook his head. "Potter was a fool to choose you. Deal with him, boys." Without another word, Draco turned and walked out.

Crabbe's lips curled in disgust. "You're not worth even fighting, Gryff-boy. At least Potter has honour. Come on, Goyle." He followed Malfoy out. Goyle nodded once and turned to leave, but not before drawing a fist back and punching Ron hard in the stomach. As Ron doubled up in agony, clutching his stomach, both Slytherins disappeared, leaving him there alone with his conscience.

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Draco did not think about Ron for long, however. Or, to put it more accurately, his distaste at Ron's reasons for betraying Luella wasn't strong enough to stop him making use of the information he'd provided. Oh, of course he didn't really believe Luella Martin was responsible. He knew the true legend of the Second Heir well enough to guess the real cause behind Luella's strange behaviour. However, if one didn't know the truth, but only knew that Salazar had left an Heir who was going to kill all the Muggle-borns, the evidence could be made to look rather damning indeed. Picturing the look on Pansy's face when he told her of these new developments, Draco quickened his pace. This was going to be fun.

A movement up ahead caught his attention. A flash of red hair. Not Weasley, surely? Not Ron, anyway. Intrigued, Draco followed. Unlikely to be Ron, not unless Crabbe and Goyle were losing their touch, but it might just be the only other Weasley likely to be down here.

Turning a corner, he spotted his target. He'd been right. Ginny Weasley it was. She was walking swiftly away from him, with something cradled in her arms. Quickening his pace, he caught up with her.

"Hey, Weasley. Where are you off to then?" grinned Draco, curious as to why yet another Weasley was so far from their common room. Although this time, there was less hostility involved. Despite himself, Draco had come to feel a genuine affection for the youngest Weasley, due in no small measure to her loudly informing not only her brother but the entire school that she'd rather be Slytherin than anything else.

Ginny nearly leapt a foot into the air. "N-nothing." she squeaked, trembling.

"Nothing?" Draco raised an eyebrow. Evidently Ginny hadn't completely managed convincingly hiding misbehaviour yet. Either that or something was up. He looked at the first year again, and noticed for the first time how pale and thin she looked. There were dark shadows under her eyes, as if she'd not been sleeping well lately, and all in all she did not look healthy. For all his air of cool disdain, Draco began to feel uncharacteristically worried. "Doesn't look like nothing. Ginny, are you alright?"

Ginny bit her lip uncertainly. Her lip trembled, and for a moment, Draco had the feeling she was about to tell him something. Then there came the sound of distant footsteps and the unmistakable sound of Crabbe and Goyle's voices.

The girl gasped and turned to run. It was then that Draco noticed the small black book in her arms.

"Is that what I think it is, Weasley?" Draco grinned, reaching for it. Ginny snatched the book away, holding it out of reach.

"Not so fast, you. Everyone's been doing their level best to keep that thing hidden from me, and I want to know why." Grabbing Ginny by the arm, he tried to grab the diary.

"No!" yelled Ginny. "Let go of me!" She struggled vainly in his arms as he tried to wrestle the diary off her. "Please, Malfoy, you're hurting me!"

"Give me the diary and I'll stop." said Draco through gritted teeth. "Come on, Weasley, make it easy on yourself."

"No!" shouted Ginny, still squirming. However, Draco was bigger than her and she was powerless to stop the diary slipping out of her grasp. With a cry of triumph, Draco pushed her away and snatched it up.

"Now to find out just what's so fascinating about this thing." He flipped the book open and stared. Blank. Every single page, blank. Just an ordinary Muggle diary. Nothing interesting at all.

"Is this it?" Draco demanded. "Just an empty diary? Is that what all the fuss was about?"

Ginny said nothing, her eyes not leaving the diary. Draco flicked to the front. Nothing there either, just the name 'T. M. Riddle'. It wasn't one he recognised, although at the back of his mind was the thought that somewhere surely he should know it, that he had heard it before. However, he couldn't place it, and he was in no mood to chase it, not when he had important business to discuss. Snapping the diary shut, he held it out to Ginny. "You might as well have it back then. I was hoping it had some juicy secrets of Potter's in it, but obviously not. Well?"

Ginny didn't answer. In fact, far from snatching the book back, she shrank from it.

"N-no." she stammered. "I - I don't want it. You have it."

Draco sighed. He just didn't get girls sometimes. "Alright, alright. Have it your way." He slipped the diary into his pocket, just as Crabbe and Goyle arrived on the scene, with Pansy Parkinson in tow.

"Hey, Malfoy, where'd you go?" Goyle asked. "We looked for you in the common room, but you weren't there."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "A good five minutes these idiots spent arguing over where you could be before I told them to try the 'Point me' charm. Good thing one of us has some sense." She noticed Ginny standing there. "Well, well, well. What's going on here?"

Ginny opened her mouth but no sound came out. While she'd seemed relatively brave with just Malfoy, the sight of Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy at her cruellest appeared to have terrified her into silence. Seeing this, and suddenly feeling the need to protect her, Draco jumped in.

"I was just having a little chat with her, that's all, Pan. But never mind her. Something's come up. I need to talk to you three in private. Come on." He beckoned them away, before turning back to Ginny. "Don't worry, it's nothing to do with you. Just run off and we'll say nothing more about it." The grateful first year nodded dumbly, before turning tail and running. Draco turned back to Pansy.

"Brace yourself, Pan. It looks like revenge might finally be ours."

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Pansy listened in delight as Draco told her what he'd learned.

"So she was actually first on the scene when Mrs. Norris got attacked!" she breathed. "Not just hanging around with Potter and his friends! Well now, isn't that interesting? And a Parselmouth too? Oh Draco, this is too, too perfect! She's fallen right into our hands! Especially being on the scene at the most recent attack!" Pansy could barely contain herself. "We've got her! We've got her!"

"Not quite." Crabbe pointed out. "There's two other attacks not yet accounted for. And she's got alibis for them. She was with Stormosi in the common room when they got that Gryffindor kid. And when that Hufflepuff caught it, she was in lessons, with Snape no less."

Goyle's face fell. "Does that mean we've not got her after all?" he asked plaintively.

"Not necessarily." Pansy was still alive with a terrifying malice. "Her arm burned in that Potions class, and it was nothing to do with a spilled potion. And this I saw with my own eyes - it burned the other time too. Stormosi saw it and tried to get her to go to the hospital wing. But she refused to go and insisted nothing was wrong. Almost as if she wanted no one to know. Almost as if she was guilty."

"A burning arm..." Draco whispered, something his father had once told him coming back to him. "Of course!" He snapped his fingers. "The Heirs bear Marks - the Dark Lord had one too. That must be it - she must have one on her arm and it burns when

there's an attack. No wonder she wants no one to see it. Anyone who didn't know better might mistake it for a Dark Mark."

Crabbe began to smile at this. "Most don't, do they?"

"Of course not." said Pansy softly. "I think Draco's ancestors have seen to that."

"We have indeed." smiled Draco. "The title Heir of Slytherin is associated so deeply with darkness that no one will want to be associated with one who bears it, or believe that they could be a force for good. First thing anyone'll think when they see a serpent symbol on her arm is that she's the Dark Lord's daughter."

"But if she wasn't at two of the attacks..." frowned Goyle.

"Oh Goyle, that's hardly relevant!" cried Pansy. "The Mark burned, that's all the evidence we need! After all, the Heir doesn't do the killing herself, does she? Everyone knows there's a monster in the Chamber. She could have been using the Mark remotely to summon the beast and sent it off to do her bidding on its own. That way, she'd be sure to have an alibi, and not risk being caught. It's the Slytherin thing to do!"

Draco nodded. "It is indeed. Well, folks. Looks like we have all the evidence we need to make a go of it. What do you say?"

"Do it!" Pansy and Crabbe both yelled.

"Go for it, boss!" grinned Goyle. "Write to your dad tonight. We can have her out of here by next week."

And from this moment on, the doom Luella had feared, and which had been circling round her for so long, finally began to close in.

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It didn't take long at all. Lucius Malfoy wrote back virtually straight away, assuring his son that he'd take good care of things. He was as good as his word. Just over a week later, Luella found herself summoned out of History of Magic by no less a person than Dumbledore himself.

"Headmaster?" she asked, curious and more than a little worried. Both Deanna and Marlie had looked concerned, and Rianne had suddenly sat bolt upright in what, if Luella hadn't known her far better than that, looked awfully like terror. She tried to dispel the image of Rianne's pale, frightened face.

"Hello, Miss Martin." Dumbledore wasn't smiling. "There are some people here who wish to see you."

"Who?" asked Luella, puzzled. It wasn't likely to be her parents and Caitlin wasn't one for dropping in unannounced.

"I'll tell you later." came the enigmatic reply. "Follow me."

He led her through the school, along the labyrinthine corridors of Hogwarts until they arrived at Professor Snape's classroom. It was empty. Luella supposed he must have a free period. Telling her to wait there, Dumbledore knocked on Snape's door and went in.

She heard the Headmaster speaking to Snape in a low, hurried voice, followed by Snape shouting "What?! Impossible! Headmaster, they can't do that, surely!"

"They can and they quite probably will, with Malfoy leading them. Severus, I need your help if we're to stop this."

"Too right we're going to stop this. Damned if I'm letting Lucius Malfoy rob me of my star student." The door burst open again and Snape strode out, Dumbledore close behind. The Potions master stopped in front of Luella and looked deep into her eyes, an unfathomable look on his face. He placed a hand on Luella's shoulder.

"Luella, I promise you, no harm will come to you. I'll do all in my power to protect you. No matter what happens, you'll always have my support. Remember that." He turned back to Dumbledore, leaving Luella more afraid than she had been before he'd spoken to her. "Come on then. Let's get this over with."

Dumbledore nodded once and led them both out.

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The three of them proceeded in silence. Snape's expression was colder and more hostile than she'd ever seen it, staring impassively into space, as if he were about to go into battle. What for, Luella didn't dare ask. She was afraid it might be on her behalf. Am I really in danger, she asked herself. But that was ridiculous, both Snape and Dumbledore were here, they'd look after her, surely. And yet, she'd not seen either of them look so tense since the night they'd performed Dream Weaver.

Finally, they arrived at Dumbledore's office. The headmaster opened the door and motioned for them both to go in.

There were two other men in the room. One was an older man in an ill-fitting Muggle suit that Luella hadn't seen before. However, the blond younger man in expensive and perfectly tailored robes who was smiling maliciously at her was someone she had no trouble recognising. Lucius Malfoy.

The older man spoke first. "Is this the one, Albus?"

"This is Luella Martin, Minister." said Dumbledore, somehow managing to sound deferential and standoffish at the same time.

"I see. Pray sit down, Miss Martin." He indicated for her to take a seat. Luella did so, wondering what on earth was going on, not liking the way Lucius Malfoy was looking at her one bit. She realised that the other man must be the Minister of Magic,

Cornelius Fudge. What he was doing here was anyone's guess, but she didn't like the way this was going.

"Would someone mind telling me what this is all about?" Snape's menacing tones came from behind her as he took up a position to her right, hovering protectively over her. "And might I add that Miss Martin happens to be a hitherto exemplary student of mine."

"No doubt." sneered Lucius. "But is it just Potions you've been teaching her, Severus?"

Fudge coughed. "Professors, it has come to my attention that Miss Martin here has been practising the Dark Arts."

"What?" gasped Luella, too stunned to keep quiet. She felt Snape's hand gripping her shoulder.

"It's not true." he snarled.

"We'll be the judge of that." said Fudge stiffly. "I have been informed that she's the one behind the recent attacks on Muggle-born students at this school."

"Miss Martin is herself Muggle-born." Dumbledore reminded him.

"Maybe." sniffed Fudge. "But that doesn't mean she's innocent."

"My wife studied Magical History at Invisible College." Lucius said, a small insidious smile announcing the imminent arrival of a secret weapon. "Her dissertation was on the semi-legendary Redeemer Prophecy. That one thousand years after the Fall of Slytherin shall come two Heirs of Slytherin, of Muggle extraction, who will finish what Salazar tried and failed to do. The first will be defeated, but the second, female, one will finish the job. Isn't that right, Miss Martin?"

"But that's not how the prophecy goes..." she began, before clapping her hand to her mouth in horror. Too late she realised she'd walked right into Lucius's trap. Lucius smiled in triumph, turning to Fudge.

"You see, Minister? She knows far more about the prophecy than any mere fourteen year old Muggle child should. And where did she get this knowledge from, I'd like to know?"

Fudge flipped open a file which Luella noticed had her name on it. "Detention, September 1989, for gaining illicit access to the Restricted Section. The only blot on an otherwise perfect record. So you found something there about the legend and realised you were the Second Heir. Is that not correct?"

"No!" cried Luella. "I'd never practice the Dark Arts!"

Fudge ignored her. "I also note you're quite friendly with Caitlin Tyler. Must be rather convenient living next to an Auror, all those esoteric manuals lying around. You must have learnt quite a bit."

"I'm not allowed anywhere near them!" Luella protested.

"She's got a point." came Lucius's sibilant tones. "You don't need books when you have an inborn talent, after all. Is she not a Parselmouth?"

Luella froze. How could he possibly know that? No one did. No one who'd be likely to tell Lucius Malfoy anyway.

Lucius raised his wand. "*Serpensortia!*" A jet black snake shot out of his wand and landed on the desk in front of her. Hissing at her, it reared up and began swaying, clearly not happy.

"And now, Miss Martin, we shall see just how reliable our informant is." Lucius gloated. He let loose another hex that struck the snake, causing it to hiss in pain and fly straight at her.

"No, don't hurt me!" Luella shrieked at it as its fangs hurtled towards her neck. Sure enough, the snake stopped hissing, closed its mouth and curled up, landing on her chest before slithering into her lap, now docile. Luella sagged with relief, stroking it gently. That was a close one. Until she looked up and saw the look of horror on Fudge's face and the grin of triumph on Lucius Malfoy's, and realised what she'd done. Trap number two had just swallowed her whole. Behind her, she heard Snape whispering "Luella, you fool!" in despair. She'd gone and used Parseltongue.

"There you have it, Minister." said Lucius, making the snake disappear with a flick of his wand. "A proven Parselmouth. Convinced yet that she's no ordinary child?"

Fudge nodded. "Yes. Yes, I am." he whispered. He seemed to regain his wits. "You had one other piece of evidence, Lucius."

Lucius nodded. "Oh yes. The coup de grace, as it were. My informant tells me that there is something the matter with her right arm. It appears to cause her pain every time an attack occurs. Is that not right, Severus?"

"Leave her alone, Lucius, you've done enough." snarled Snape through gritted teeth.

"I don't think so, Severus." Lucius smiled. "If you would be so good as to roll up your sleeve, Miss Martin."

Luella looked at Snape, terrified beyond measure now. Snape squeezed her shoulder as a gesture of reassurance, before answering for her.

"No. No, I'm not going to let you do this, Lucius." he said, daring the other man to challenge him.

Lucius just laughed. "Severus, someone with your history should no better than to go around protecting Dark Mages. Someone might think you're up to your old habits again. Now stand aside, man."

Snape stood back, too stunned at the audacity of Lucius Malfoy of all people bringing up the old Death Eater accusations to prevent what happened next. Lucius raised his wand again to let loose another hex. In a moment the sleeve of Luella's robe had torn in two, falling apart to reveal her Mark. Luella desperately tried to hold it together, but Lucius was too quick for her. Striding over to her side, he snatched her hands away, holding the torn fabric back so that no one could miss the conjoined serpents emblazoned there.

"See there, Minister." said Lucius calmly. "The final proof. The ancient symbol of Salazar Slytherin's child and protégée, Morgan of the Tal-y-Rhys. The Parselmouth and Dark Seeress who famously hurled her revenge at the other Founders that Slytherin would rise again and then no one would be able to withstand them. The ancestress of the notorious Tal-y-Rhys dark witches."

"They're not dark witches!" Luella yelled, struggling in Lucius's grasp.

"Shut up, girl." Lucius told her. "The entire bloodline was notorious for abduction, vampirism, infanticide, succubism and incubism, bewitchment and other arts of that nature. And this was one of their symbols. A Mark of absolute evil, indicating their ability to go underground and rejuvenate even in the most adverse of circumstances."

"Liar." said Severus softly. Lucius stopped and looked up.

"What did you say?" he asked, eyes glittering murderously.

"You heard." came the reply. "It's not evil and we both know it. It's an ancient symbol of healing and rebirth, one of the most ancient and powerful. Evil can't touch it. All your lies won't change that."

Lucius drew his breath sharply, his eyes incandescent with rage. He let Luella go, and for a moment, she thought he was going to hit him. But he controlled himself.

"An ex-Death Eater would say that, wouldn't he?" Lucius hissed. He turned back to Fudge. "Minister, are you convinced of her guilt?"

Fudge nodded. "Do it, Lucius." he said hoarsely. He produced a document from his clothes, signed it, and passed it to Lucius. "I authorise you to use the mandate the other governors gave you. Do it now."

Lucius smiled in triumph as he began to read. "We, the governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, subject to investigation by our designated representative Lucius Malfoy, do hereby pronounce ourselves satisfied that the student Luella Angelica Martin is guilty of using Dark Arts against her fellow students."

"She is not!" raged Snape. "I tell you, she's innocent!"

Lucius ignored him and continued.

"By the power vested in us as governors, we hereby banish and expel her from Hogwarts School and the magical community, and do expressly forbid her to practice any form of the Arts Magick again for as long as she shall live, effective immediately."

"No. Oh no." Luella whispered, shaking all over. This wasn't happening, couldn't be happening. They couldn't send her away, couldn't send her back to being just an ordinary Muggle, they couldn't!

"You can't do this, Malfoy!" snarled Snape. "She's innocent!"

"Too late, Severus." smiled Lucius sanctimoniously. "I just did."

Snape turned to Dumbledore in anguish. "Albus, do something. Please!"

Dumbledore shook his head in sorrow. "Severus, there's nothing I can do. I can't overrule an official mandate from the governors that the Minister himself has authorised."

Lucius turned back to Snape with a smirk. "And now, if I can be allowed to get on with my job please? *Accio* wand!" Luella's wand flew out from her sleeve and into Lucius's outstretched hand.

"No. Please, no. Don't, please, I beg you." Luella choked. "Not my wand, please no!"

"Should have thought of that before you started stalking your fellow students, shouldn't you?" said Fudge harshly. "Be grateful you're not going to Azkaban. Lucius, do it."

Lucius just smiled indolently as with one flick of his wrists, he snapped Luella's wand in two with an awful crack that echoed around the room. A shower of green sparks shot out of the break, before the wand finally died, becoming nothing more than shards of hazel with limp dragon heartstrings dangling from them.

A terrible silence descended over the room, punctuated only by Luella's sobs as she watched her power and status as a witch dying before her eyes. Lucius threw the ruins of her wand at her with a sneer before turning to leave.

"I think we're done here. Shall we go, Minister?"

Fudge nodded, getting to his feet. "I think we should. There's nothing more to be done here. Good day gentlemen." He inclined his head as he followed Lucius out.

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Chapter Twenty One And Then There Were Three

Luella followed Snape through the school in silence. He'd mended the torn sleeve on her robe, not that it mattered now. It wasn't like she'd ever wear it again, after all. Snape hadn't said anything to her since they'd left Dumbledore's office. She didn't dare ask what he thought of her now. And yet he'd stood up to Malfoy. He'd tried to defend her. He must know she'd been set up. That alone gave her hope. He'd help her out, try and get her reinstated or at least help her get settled in the Muggle world again. Wouldn't he?

They arrived in the Slytherin corridor. Luella made to go back to her dorm and start packing, but a simple touch on her shoulder stopped her. She turned round and saw Snape looking at her, anguish in his eyes and sorrow all over his face.

"Wait, Luella. There's no need to rush this. I'm not so heartless as to fling you on the next train home. Come." He indicated for her to follow him inside.

She closed the office door behind her and hesitated. Snape lifted his wand, lit the fire and turned to look at her with that same agonised gaze. For a few moments, they said nothing, just watching the other, before Snape stepped forward, covered the distance between them and swept her into his arms, stroking her hair in a surprisingly tender gesture. Returning the embrace, Luella buried her head in his robes and let the tears she'd been holding back flow freely.

"Don't, child." she heard him whisper, pained, desperate and never before so powerless. "It'll be alright, I promise. I'll get your name cleared, I'll get you back in this school somehow, I swear it Luella. I promise you."

"You couldn't stop them kicking me out." she whispered back. He drew her all the more close.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Child, I... I let you down, I should have protected you, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." Luella whispered. "I used Parseltongue, didn't I? Walked straight into Malfoy's trap not once but twice. Why on earth didn't I see what was coming? Try and outsmart him."

"No fault but ours." Snape replied harshly. "We should have told you what was happening before we took you in there, devised some kind of strategy. But no. We kept on treating you like some kind of child who couldn't fight her own battles, and what happened? Lucius ran rings around us all and you were the one to suffer. Will you ever forgive me?" He let her go and gazed unhappily into her eyes.

"You did your best." Luella reassured him. "Malfoy and Mr. Fudge, you saw them. They were determined to see me out of here. Don't blame yourself."

"No." Snape straightened up. "No, you're right. We can't just sit here and wallow in misery. Come on, come and sit down." He indicated the chair before his desk. Luella slumped gratefully into it and watched as once more, he unlocked the drinks cabinet

and produced a bottle of brandy. However, this time he produced not one tumbler, but two. He poured one for himself, before turning to her.

"I don't normally make a habit of hitting the bottle, despite what you may think, but at times like this, it can be of great comfort. Would you like to try some? Just a small measure for medicinal purposes, you understand. You have enough on your plate as it is, the last thing I want to do is add to them by sending you home drunk."

"Shame." murmured Luella, suddenly wondering what drunkenness was like and if it really was a panacea for all ills. "Go on then, just a bit."

Snape poured her a small measure, a wry smile on his face as he passed the glass over to her. Luella lifted it to her lips and knocked it back.

And promptly began choking and spluttering, trying to get the bitter aftertaste out of her mouth and stop the feeling that her throat was on fire.

"Water!" she gasped, pushing what remained of the brandy as far away from her as possible. Snape just smiled, trying to suppress a laugh, and topped up another glass from a small water fountain in one corner. Luella took it from him gratefully and downed it. It didn't get rid of the taste entirely, but at least it got rid of the burning.

"Jesus." she whispered, shaking her head, before staring at a still grinning Snape in amazement. "You seriously drink that stuff for fun?"

"Oh yes." Snape nodded. "I like the kick. Gives me a nice, warm feeling inside." He shrugged. "Well, something has to. Not to your taste I take it."

"No." Luella shuddered. "God almighty, things would have to be pretty bad before I started knocking that stuff back."

"Good." Snape removed her glass of brandy and put the bottle away. "That was my intention. Another case of underage drinking and alcoholism prevented. One good thing accomplished today. Now to business." He sat up, brisk and efficient suddenly. "We need to work out a short term strategy to help you readjust. Hopefully that's all we'll need - I'm hoping we can get you back into Hogwarts before the year ends. But in the mean time, we'll need to make arrangements."

"My parents are going to kill me." Luella whispered, the horrible reality of it all sinking in.

"Not if they don't know about it." Snape replied, opening a drawer in his desk and producing what looked like Floo powder. Tossing a handful into the fire, he called out "Mel Lovegood, DDAE. Secure line, password Eleanor Rigby." Seeing Luella's raised eyebrow, Snape just shrugged. "Mel likes that record."

The flames flared green, and a head emerged in the fire. But it wasn't Melissa Lovegood. It was Caitlin.

"Severus?" Caitlin blinked. "Is something wrong?"

"Caitlin?" Snape stared at her. "What are you doing there?"

"I work here." came the crisp reply. "Mel has the day off so all her calls are being rerouted to me. What do you want, Severus?"

"Want? Oh, er, ah... Erm, Caitlin, I need your help." Snape stammered.

"Figures." sighed Caitlin. "What is it this time?"

"There's an owl on its way from Hogwarts to Luella's house. I need you to intercept it and make sure it doesn't reach its destination. Take the letter it brings and destroy it before the Martins see it. If either one of them does chance to read it, then use Memory Charms to make them forget they ever saw it. Could you do that for me? Please?"

Caitlin was looking at him extremely suspiciously. "Why?"

"It's very important. Something's happened, and I don't want Luella's parents to know about it."

Caitlin's eyes widened. "Something's happened? Severus, you don't mean... I mean, she's not been..." Her bottom lip began to tremble as an emotion Luella had hardly ever before seen on Caitlin's face began to make itself shown - that of fear. "She's not been attacked, has she?"

Snape shook his head. "No. No, she's fine. Have no worries on that score."

Caitlin sighed with relief. "Thank the gods. But if it's not that... Severus, what *has* happened?"

"Lucius Malfoy happened." said Snape coldly. "Somehow, don't ask me how, he found out she's the Second Heir and twisted the evidence to make it look like Luella was causing the attacks. The governors have just expelled her."

"What?!" gasped Caitlin. "But... they can't! She's done nothing wrong!"

"You know that, I know that. But the governors chose to believe Malfoy's word over that of Dumbledore and myself, and out she goes."

"Oh my god..." Caitlin whispered, clearly horrified. "Is she alright?"

"All things considered, she could have taken it a lot worse, but I wouldn't say she was happy with the situation."

"Oh my... Is she there? Can I talk to her?" Caitlin asked, visibly shaking. Snape nodded and beckoned Luella over. Luella got up and walked over to the fire, kneeling in front of Caitlin's worried face, unsure what to do.

"Hello?" she began, hesitantly.

"Hi, Luella." said Caitlin, trying to smile. "Sweetheart, are you alright?"

Luella opened her mouth to say yes, of course she was, but no sound came out. Because it wasn't true, was it? She felt as far from alright as it was possible to be. Instead, she just shook her head and burst into tears.

"What am I going to do, Caitlin?" she sobbed. "I can't go back to being a Muggle, I just can't! I'm not one of them, I don't feel myself around them, I'm no good at pretending to be one of them, and I hated Muggle school! I can't go back to one, I just can't!"

"Of course you won't, darling." Caitlin soothed her. "A witch you are, and a witch you'll stay. We'll think of something to tell your parents, don't worry. And in the meantime, you're going to come and live with me, until the summer holidays. I'll intercept that owl, I'll pick you up at King's Cross, they need never know you're not at school. And if you're not cleared by the summer, well then we'll just find you another school to go to."

"You will?" Luella dried her eyes. "But... there aren't any others in the country, are there?"

"Not this country." smiled Caitlin. "But there's plenty abroad. In fact there's one in America called New Hogwarts, a lot like this one with the same houses and everything. If we can't get you back into the real Hogwarts, then we'll find you a place in the next best thing."

"Really?" Luella's eyes widened. "But... will they want someone who was expelled from their old school for practising the Dark Arts?"

Snape coughed delicately. "Seeing as your school report and references from your House Master and Headmaster aren't going to mention anything of the sort, I can't see that'll be a problem."

"They're not?" Luella asked in surprise. She began to smile as it dawned on her that this wasn't going to be quite the disaster she'd feared. "You... you'd both be willing to lie for me like that?"

Snape and Caitlin nodded. "Of course we would!" Caitlin declared.

"It's the least we could do." shrugged Snape.

"But..." said Luella, still suffering a few residual doubts, "Isn't this unethical?"

"What, and getting you expelled for something you didn't do isn't?" asked Caitlin, her words tinged with anger.

"Well, when you put it like that..." said Luella, her doubts beginning to dissolve. "Alright! Let's do it!" She turned from one to the other, unable to stop smiling. "Thank you. Both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you, you know? You've both done so much for me. Thank you!" She gave Snape an impulsive hug. After

blinking in amazement at someone wanting to spontaneously hug him, he smiled and returned it. It wasn't often he got hugged for the sake of it and he wanted to make the most of it, although that grin of Caitlin's was putting him off a bit.

"Someone's popular, aren't they, Sevi?" she chuckled.

"Stop it." he muttered, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically embarrassed. He let Luella go. She sat up and turned back to Caitlin.

"I'd hug you too, but I'm not sure I can via the Floo." Luella told her.

"Not to worry, dear." Caitlin smiled. "I'll be seeing you soon enough anyway." She turned back to Snape. "Well, I'd better get straight on to this. I'll have to owl Mel, sort out a Ministry car for the day, get Carmela to hold the fort here, then get straight on to intercept duty. I suppose I shall see you at some point?"

"I'll see if I can drop in tonight, or tomorrow." Snape promised. "Thanks Caitlin." "No problem." Caitlin replied, her face fading away and vanishing, leaving the two of them alone. Snape breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well. That went rather better than I'd thought, didn't it?"

Luella guessed that he wasn't just talking about making arrangements for her welfare. "Look, you don't have to visit us or anything. I mean, I'll understand if you'd rather not see us. I won't be upset or angry or anything."

"Nonsense, Luella." Snape patted her shoulder. "I'm coming to see you, and that is final. Besides, if I don't visit you, how are you going to manage to continue your education?"

Luella's face fell. "What? You mean I'm still going to have to do work?"

"Yes, you are. Don't look at me like that. If you're going to get reinstated or sent to another school, you'll need to make sure you don't fall behind with your studies." Snape looked at her with his stern, pushy teacher look. "I don't want to have to go to all the trouble of getting you into New Hogwarts only to find you have no idea what you're meant to be studying, after all."

"No sir." said Luella quietly, still a little disappointed that she wasn't about to get four months extra holiday out of things.

"Excellent." Snape's face softened. "Now all that remains is to break the news to your friends. Deanna's not going to take this very well, is she?"

Luella shook her head. "She's going hit the roof. I'd put Draco under armed guard if I were you. Not to mention whoever told him I was the Second Heir. How did he know about the Mark, Professor?"

Snape shook his head. "I don't know, Luella. However, given Deanna's natural cunning, I don't think I shall have long to wait before we find out."

Luella chuckled. "No, I don't suppose we shall. I almost feel sorry for whoever it was." She caught the look Snape was giving her. "Only a little, mind."

"Much better. I know you're capable of feeling compassion for the most unworthy of wretches," here a very thoughtful look, "but even so, there's limits." He got to his feet. "Lessons will be ending as we speak. I'll call her in so you can say your goodbyes in private, break the news to her yourself." He walked over to one of his cupboards to reveal a round object covered in a black velvet cloth, which he snatched away to reveal a small crystal ball. He tapped it with his wand and muttered a few words, causing it to turn green and start glowing. Leaning forward, he spoke into it.

"Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office, please. Your presence is required here immediately. That's Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office." Stepping away, he tapped the ball again, causing it to go dark again and covered it, before closing the doors and returning to Luella.

"It's the school intercom." Snape explained, seeing Luella's puzzled expression. "For urgent announcements and contacting those not within reach of a Floo connection. Deanna'll be here any minute."

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"Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office." Snape's voice echoed around the corridors. "Your presence is required here immediately. That's Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office."

"What've you done now, Tyler?" Lucas called from behind her. History of Magic had now finished and all the Slytherins were making their way back to the Nest.

"Nothing!" protested Deanna. "I've been behaving myself. Honestly."

"A likely story." Lucas scoffed. Next to him, Alex Lynch shook his head.

"First Lu gets dragged off by Dumbledore, now you're up in front of Snape. What have you two been up to?"

"Nothing!" snapped Deanna. "It's Marlie I team up with when I want to do something unorthodox!"

"Tyler!" Marlie hissed. "Keep your voice down!"

"Sorry Marls. But seriously, why on earth does Snape want to see me? I've done nothing wrong." Deanna said, confused.

Marlie fingered her necklace. "I don't know. But when Snape asks to see you, it's not normally a good sign. What do you think, Ri? Ri?"

Rianne didn't answer. Ever since Luella had been taken from their class, she'd been staring into space as if worried about something. And now, she look positively terrified.

"Ri?" Marlie asked, starting to feel rather anxious herself. Her necklace had been giving off warning signals all morning, and now it was positively screaming trouble at her. And the sight of normally self-composed, completely unflappable Rianne Stormosi trembling and shaking like a frightened child was not helping. "Ri, what is it?"

"Yeah, Ri, you look like you've seen a ghost." said Deanna, also picking up on Rianne's fears. "What's up?"

"Lu." whispered Rianne. "It's Lu. She's in trouble." She turned to Deanna, wild-eyed. "Tyler, go and find her! Go now!"

"What?" gasped Deanna. "Ri, what are you talking about, Lu's done nothing wrong, and besides I have to go and see Snape..."

"WELL GO AND SEE HIM THEN!" Rianne screamed at her. "Because Lu's in trouble, they're going to do something terrible to her if they haven't already! That's why Dumbledore took her out of class, that's why Snape wants to see you now. So don't just stand there, get a move on!"

Deanna looked dumbfounded. "But Ri, how on earth could you possibly know...?"

"DEANNA, GO!" Rianne shouted, by now on the verge of hysteria. "GET MOVING! NOW!"

"Alright, alright." said Deanna, shaken by Rianne's loss of control. "I'm going!" Turning around, she began to run towards the dungeons.

Marlie watched her go, stunned. She turned to Rianne, who had buried her head in her hands, still shaking.

"Ri, what's going on?" Marlie whispered. "What is it? Is Lu OK? Talk to me, Ri!"

Rianne just shook her head. "I don't know." she said, her voice empty, all emotion spent screaming at Deanna. "I hope I'm wrong, that I'm off-base this time, that it didn't happen, isn't going to happen, that this is just my imagination. But I'm scared, I'm just so scared..." She let her hands fall to her sides.

Marlie took her by the arm, troubled but determined not to show it. Last thing they needed was for all four of them to lose it. "Come on. We're going back to the dorm. You need a rest and some water, and a bit of privacy. And when DT's finished with Snape and Lu turns up, we'll get to the bottom of this. Come on. Let's get you home."

Rianne silently assented as Marlie led her away.

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Deanna arrived at Snape's office with not a little trepidation. After all, he hardly ever sent for any of his students unless there was a problem. Had it been good news, he'd have stopped her in the corridor or after class for a chat. This, on the other hand, was

more like a summons. Deanna shook herself, but couldn't get rid of the sense of foreboding hanging over her. She still didn't know why Luella had been hauled out of class, or where she was now. And Snape hardly ever used the intercom. That was McGonagall's baby. Snape preferred the personal approach. So much more effective psychologically. Which was why the current situation was setting off alarm bells. Gathering her courage, she knocked on the door and walked in.

She was met with a sight that seemed to confirm her worst fears. Snape wasn't sitting at his desk. Instead, he was in front of the fire, with his arm around a young girl in Slytherin colours who Deanna had no trouble recognising as Luella. Now, even though Snape and Luella were close, they weren't 'curling up together in front of a roaring fire' close, at least she hoped not. That would be just too weird. Besides, Snape would probably want something like that kept well hidden, and given that he'd just asked her to arrive, he either wanted her to see this or just didn't care. Either way, it meant trouble.

Deanna coughed nervously. "Er... you wanted to see me, sir?"

Both of them turned around. Snape smiled to see her there, but his eyes told a different story. Deanna flinched from the pain there and turned to Luella.

And felt her heart stop as she saw that Luella had tears rolling down her face. She tried to smile, but her heart clearly wasn't in it.

"Hello." she whispered, sounding as if she were about to fall apart.

"Lu!" Deanna gasped, striding over to her friend and sliding down next to her in one fluid motion. "What happened?" She ran an uncomprehending finger down Luella's cheek. "Why are you crying?"

Luella shook her head. "Deanna, I..." She stopped talking and flung her arms around her friend, burying her face in Deanna's hair. Deanna, still staring in shock, held her, smoothing her hair mechanically, caught in a bewildered trance. Trying to make sense of it all, she turned to Snape.

"What's going on?" she asked, desperate for answers. "Why's Lu so upset? What's happened?"

Snape shook his head, lowering his eyes in sorrow. "Malfoy." he said quietly. "Lucius Malfoy found out she was the Second Heir."

"What?" gasped Deanna. "How?"

"I don't know." Snape replied, anger beginning to shade the sadness. "But he knew she was a Parselmouth, and he knew about the Mark. And he persuaded the rest of the governors that she was the Heir of Slytherin. They expelled her this morning."

"WHAT??" Deanna screamed. She spun back to face Luella. "Oh gods. Lu, no. Tell me it's not true. Please. It can't be, it just can't!" She stared at her friend in horror, silently pleading for Luella to deny it.

Luella could only shake her head in misery as she lifted her head up to look Deanna in the eye. "I'm sorry, mate. I'm so sorry."

"No." whispered Deanna, the desperation draining away, leaving her looking and sounding like the frightened child she'd once been. "Lu, no. Oh gods. No, they can't send you away. They can't! I need you here, Lu. I need you." She traced a finger down her friend's cheek, unable to believe it. "I need you." she whispered again, before reaching out and pulling Luella into her arms.

Snape coughed delicately as he got to his feet. "I'll let you two have some privacy. I'll be back in a few minutes." He walked swiftly across the room and through the door leading to his private apartments.

Deanna didn't say anything. There was nothing she could say. The one awful thought kept flying around her head - *they've kicked my best mate out. Luella's leaving.*

Luella's tears seemed to subside. "It's weird how things pan out, isn't it?" she whispered. "I always did wonder if it was a fluke, you know. If someone had made a mistake and I wasn't really meant to be here at all. Kept worrying that I might get sent away any minute. It just didn't seem real. Then last year, with Voldemort and the Stone and everything, I finally felt like I'd earned the right to be here." She laughed bitterly. "Looks like I was right the first time, wasn't I? Stupid of me to think I could really get away from the Muggles. Maybe Salazar had the right idea. I'm not worthy to study magic, am I?"

"Stop that!" Deanna told her, inwardly horrified by Luella's words, by the thought that any mage could think their power unfounded. "Lu, of course you're meant to be here! You're a witch, one of the most powerful I know, maybe as good as my mum one day, you have Glamoury for Hera's sake, of course you belong here! Lu, you are Slytherin Redeemer. If you don't belong here, who does?"

"Not a pure-blood though, am I?" said Luella quietly. "It's alright for you, you've never had to wonder, you've always known. You're a Tal-y-Rhys, you can trace your ancestors right back to the Founding and beyond. Two of them started this school. This is your reality, you've never known anything else. I'm just a Muggle-born with a weird tattoo who everyone thinks might be a Tal-y-Rhys Messiah."

"We don't think, we know." said Deanna, with just a hint of annoyance. Cupping Luella's face in her hands she stared deep into the other girl's eyes. "Lu, you're a Parselmouth and a Glamourer. Two rare abilities associated with the Tal-y-Rhys line and you've got not one but two. You are the Second Heir. And Malfoy's conniving won't change that. Listen, I'll tell Mum, get her to pull some strings. She'll have you back here in no time!" Deanna patted her on the shoulder, trying to sound confident.

"She knows." came the less than upbeat response. "She's going to shelter me at your place until the summer, and if I'm not reinstated by then, she's sending me to this place in the States called New Hogwarts."

Deanna's mood shifted instantly, leaving her staring at Luella in what could only be envy. "New Hogwarts! Wow! Lu, that's one of the most prestigious schools in the

Western Hemisphere. Well, apart from the Eldorado Institute at Tiahuanaco, and the Native American one in the Grand Canyon, but you couldn't get into the Grand Canyon one anyway as they only accept Native Americans, and Eldorado's miles away, dealing with Incan magic which is completely different. But anyway, New Hogwarts though! God, I almost wish I was getting expelled now. If you do end up going there, is there any way I could, you know, come along too? To help you settle in, like."

Luella couldn't help smiling. "You'll have to ask Caitlin. But she might let you." She lowered her voice. "Is it really that good?"

Deanna nodded. "Oh yeah. Fantastic Quidditch teams, all of them. Only Stateside school that plays it."

"I can hardly wait." said Luella, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Very good Potions teacher too." Deanna added.

"As good as Snape?" asked Luella.

Deanna stopped smiling. "Academically, yes. But whether he's as good with Slytherins in trouble, I don't know."

Luella looked at the floor. "It won't be the same, Deanna. It's not this Hogwarts. You won't be there. Or Marls. Or Ri. The Slytherin common room there won't be decked out in psychedelic lights, it won't have a stereo, it won't have you and Marls obsessing over Quidditch, it won't have me and Rianne both rolling our eyes and mocking you behind your backs, there won't be a sweepstake on how many points Gryffindor are going to lose this week, there won't be a Syndicate, there won't be you and Malfoy sniping at each other the whole time. All the little things I love about this place, they won't be there, will they? It won't be the same. God, I'm going to miss this place so much!" She buried herself in Deanna's arms again, sobbing quietly.

"We'll all miss you too." Deanna whispered, the realisation striking her in the heart with a pang of heartache as she realised that Luella really was going, that in a matter of hours, it'd be just three of them in the dorm. That for the rest of the school year, no matter what happened in the future, Luella would not be there. "Gods Lu, I wish you weren't leaving! That bloody family, I swear to Hades I'll get them for this." She pulled Luella to her, a savage gleam in her eyes. "I am going to avenge this, Lu. No one does this to a friend of mine and gets away with it. I'm going to find out who told Malfoy about you and I am going to make them regret they'd ever been born magical. Gods almighty Lu, but they are going to suffer and suffer and suffer until I'm through with them. What I did to Dexter Crabbe is going to look like an act of benevolence and mercy compared to this!"

"Deanna, you don't have to!" Luella whispered, a little shocked at the ferocity in Deanna's eyes although not really very surprised. "I don't want you to get in trouble too."

Deanna just shrugged. "The worst they can do is expel me and if that happens, well at least we'll be together again. And yes I do have to. You don't think they'll be allowed to get away with this, do you? If I can do justice in this at least, then it'll go part way to making things OK."

"Oh Deanna..." sighed Luella, before flinging her arms around her friend. "You're the best mate I've ever had, you know that?"

"You're not so bad yourself." Deanna said, smiling despite herself. For a few moments they did nothing but hold each other, before the door opened again, and Professor Snape re-entered the room.

"It's time." was all he said. Deanna let her friend go, a lump in her throat. This was it. It was over. Really over. She wouldn't see Luella again until Easter after this.

Luella pulled herself to her feet, trembling. "Do I have to?"

"You can't stay here, child." came the reply, gentle despite its firmness. "I've given you all the time I could."

Luella hung her head, resigned to her fate. "Is everyone in lessons yet?"

"Not yet. There's ten more minutes of break left. I thought you might want a chance to say goodbye to Miss Stormosi and Miss Lovegood too."

"Yeah, Rianne's been in an awful state all morning." Deanna added. "Reckoned you were in danger and needed me. She was right too, damn the woman."

"Did she now?" said Snape thoughtfully. "That's interesting. Very interesting. I must start watching her carefully."

"Ooh, bet she'll love that." murmured Deanna, shooting a grin at Luella. The other girl didn't respond.

"I can't do it." whispered Luella. "I can't face it, having to go back to my housemates and tell them what happened. Can't face Malfoy grinning at me and Pansy sneering 'Where's your wand then, Martin?'. I just can't stand the humiliation!"

"Then don't." said Snape simply.

Luella looked up. "What?"

"Don't face it." said Snape calmly. "You may not have a wand, but you still have Glamoury. Veil yourself. Walk right past them without any of them seeing. Or walk past like a queen, daring them to challenge you. Whatever makes you feel happier."

Luella finally began to smile. "Yes. Yes I could, couldn't I? Hell, if they already think I'm the evil Heir of Slytherin, the least I could do is act like it." She smoothed out her robes in one assured gesture. "Come on Deanna. Let's go out in style." Shaking her hair, she sashayed out of the room, head held high.

Deanna gave Snape one last grin before following her out. This was going to be interesting.

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Luella took a deep breath as she stood outside the door to the Serpents' Nest. As common room entrances went, it wasn't exactly ornate. Instead of the portraits, tapestries and swivelling bookshelves that marked the other common rooms (Penelope had told her that the Ravenclaw common room opened out into the library - if you stood next to a certain set of shelves tucked away at the back and said the right password, the whole thing would rotate round and fling you into Ravenclawland), Slytherin just had a blank wall. No stone dragons, gargoyles or snakes, no portraits of great manipulators of history. Just stone. Well, what else would you have expected in a dungeon? As Rianne had once said, a life size portrait of Machiavelli in the middle of an otherwise empty underground corridor would be all very well, but it would also announce to even the least aware Hufflepuff that something was up. Why not just have a big neon sign saying "Slytherin Common Room This Way!" and have done, and no Marlie that wasn't a suggestion for decorating it.

Luella couldn't help smiling. Happy days. Still hard to believe that she'd never witness any of it again. But no. She couldn't afford to think about that now. She needed Glamoury to work for her, and unless your mind was focused and calm, Glamoury didn't work that effectively. While it could make people believe anything you wanted, it did require that you yourself believe in it too. Calm, she told herself. Be calm and relaxed. You're the Heir of Slytherin, Child of the Tal-y-Rhys, Chosen One of Morgan. Act like it.

Luella reached out for a certain brick that was marked with an almost invisible carving of a snake curled round a tree. You didn't have to open the door this way, just speaking the password was usually enough, and most Slytherins could never be bothered using the long version. But there were times when nothing less than the full Tolkien-esque splendour would do. She rubbed the carving three times widdershins and watched as it began to glow, tendrils of gleaming silvery light winding out from the centre, gradually weaving themselves into a magnificent picture of a giant archway, with an apple tree in the middle with a snake wrapped around its trunk. A scene that never failed to impress Luella, although she couldn't help feeling that it looked a little asymmetrical, as if something were missing. She couldn't think what it was though, and she had no time for wondering now. Drawing herself up to her full height, she cast a Glamour around herself and spoke the password.

"Fear is the mind-killer." Very appropriate. Mike Lovegood's choice, that one - despite technophobic leanings, he did like Muggle science fiction. Certainly it was better than some previous efforts, such as the one they'd had over the holidays, *pure-blood*. Although the usual method of choosing a Slytherin password, holding a lottery of everyone in the house and giving the winner the opportunity to pick that week's password, was all very democratic, it did lead to some rather unpleasant choices on occasion. You could always tell when it had been Malfoy's turn.

Luella brushed that thought out of her mind too. Another thing to miss, another thing to be ruthlessly airbrushed away lest it interfere with her thinking and gods forbid lead

to a public show of pain. As the stone before her shimmered and faded away, leaving the silver archway now surrounding a yawning gap in the wall, she gathered her courage and went in.

Silence fell as one by one, the denizens of Slytherin looked up and noticed her. So far, so good. Some of the younger Slytherins were backing away nervously, and all were staring as if they'd never seen her before. Excellent work. Luella nodded, satisfied so far before seeking out Rianne and Marlie. Nowhere in sight, either of them. Well, Deanna had said Rianne had been upset all morning. Probably in the dorm then. Which just left the architect of her demise.

He was there, sitting pretty with the usual crowd. Crabbe and Goyle, both smirking, both with triumphalism crowning them like a wreath. Pansy, sneering as usual. And Malfoy himself in the midst of it all, lolling on a beanbag, arrogance incarnate, grinning with an insolence Luella could only dream of slapping out of him. However, eye contact soon changed that. Pansy's sneer faded, Goyle immediately edged behind Malfoy and started looking guiltily away, a definite note of uncertainty crept in behind Crabbe's arrogant front, and Malfoy himself was looking distinctly less jubilant than he had been.

She ignored the others. No sense dealing with lackeys - the king himself was what she wanted. She walked straight over to Malfoy, aware of every other eye in the room on her, and stood over him, eyes not leaving his for a moment.

"So you've had your victory," she heard herself saying. "You've had your revenge. Three years ago in this very room I saw your sibs expelled, and now the wheel's come full circle and it's my turn. But I'll tell you this, when they came to us afterwards and threatened us, they didn't frighten us. Because we knew we were in the right, and we knew we could deal with any revenge they planned. Deanna laughed in Dexter Crabbe's face and told him he should have taken his own advice to trust no one. And afterwards, we sat back and celebrated. What will you be doing?" She upped the Glamour and forced her features into a sneer not unlike Malfoy's own. "I'll tell you. You'll be staring into the fire, wondering if you did the right thing, knowing your actions were unjust, fearing retaliation and living in constant fear of when that sword of Damocles will fall. You may have won the battle, but you've already lost the war. I might be gone now, but I'll live on in your minds, and there'll be no peace for you. Because you have done the unforgivable - you've attacked someone stronger than you are. I'll be back, Malfoy. To finish my mission. To rid the school of all those unworthy to study magic. And you, Draco Malfoy, will be the first to go." She stepped back, surveying the results. Surveying Draco Malfoy's shaken face, Pansy reduced to a little girl cowering behind her friends, Crabbe and Goyle frozen like statues and just as capable of protecting their master. If she had to go, then at least she'd made sure a little piece of herself would be around to haunt those who'd forced her out.

A quiet cough from behind her pierced the silence. Luella turned round. Deanna was standing there, watching her, with a small, secretive smile on her face. Without a word, she extended her hand and touched Luella's shoulder, leading her away. She understood at once. Time to go, to leave them for others to avenge. Time to leave

Slytherin behind and go now to her last farewells. Ignoring the stares and whispers now breaking out behind her back, she allowed Deanna to lead her to the dorm.

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Rianne and Marlie leapt to their feet as the door opened. The first thing that Luella registered was Rianne racing over to her and leaning down to take her face in her hands.

"Are you OK?" the other girl whispered. "Are you safe? Not hurt?"

Luella didn't even know where to start with that. She wasn't exactly in danger, but she wasn't OK either. And Rianne looked as if the slightest piece of bad news would tear her apart.

"I... I don't know." she said, truthfully enough.

"Your wand, Lu." said Rianne in desperation. "Where is your wand? Show me your wand!"

Luella bit her lip. Rianne did know. Unable to answer, she just hung her head in shame. Rianne let her go, turning away with a horrible choking sob.

"Oh gods." was all she could say. "It happened, didn't it? It really happened. Gods!" She collapsed on the bed, oblivious to the concerned looks of her friends.

"What happened?" asked Marlie, turning frantically from Luella to Rianne in turn. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

"Malfoy." whispered Rianne. "He broke your wand, didn't he?"

Luella nodded. Too painful to admit it, too shameful to say those two little words "I'm expelled."

"Broke your wand?" said Marlie, now even more bewildered. "Why? I wouldn't stand for that if I were you, Lu. Get his father to pay for a new one then hex him to death with it."

"Not Draco!" hissed Rianne, raising her eyes to Marlie's, causing the other girl to flinch away. "Lucius." She waited, letting the implications sink in.

"But why would Lucius Malfoy break Lu's wand - oh!" Marlie's hands flew to her face as it dawned on her what the only occasions were for the formal breaking of a mage's wand. Their funeral... or their banishment. "Oh my god. Oh, Lu. Lu, no way! But why, I mean, how, I mean, you've done nothing wrong..."

"That wasn't what you were thinking last November." said Deanna quietly. "You were thinking just the reverse back then, and now it seems someone else has drawn the same conclusion. They expelled her this morning."

A low moan escaped Rianne's lips as she huddled on the bed. "No." she began to weep. "Oh gods, no. No, no, NO!" She got to her feet and began pacing the floor. "Damn it, damn it, damn it, why am I cursed like this, why didn't I see it earlier, why did it have to come so late, why couldn't it have come early enough to let me warn you, WHY?" She screamed the last word, her usual calm shattering. Turning to Luella, she strode forward and drew her friend into a hug, tears rolling down her cheek. "I knew it, Lu. I saw it happen. Saw you sitting in Dumbledore's office, with Malfoy across from you with this horrible gloating grin on his face with your wand in his hands, and he - he... snapped it in two..." The words dissolved into tears as she buried her face in Luella's hair.

Deanna and Marlie both frowned, looking at each other in confusion.

"Saw it?" Marlie asked. "But Ri, you were with us all along, how on earth...?"

Deanna however was beginning to realise just why Rianne had reacted in the way she had.

"Exactly, you were with us, so the only way you could have seen..." here she paused, as the reality finally sunk in. "Ri, you've got the Sight!"

"Much good it's ever done me." laughed Rianne coldly as she let Luella go. "I spent most of my childhood using it to fund my father's gambling habit, and most of my teens frustrated that it never warned me of anything I really needed to know. It never told me my mother was still alive, it never told me about your father, Deanna, and it never bloody told me about Lu until it was far too late to warn her or do anything." She sank onto her bed once more, weary to the bone and utterly exhausted. "I saw it as soon as Dumbledore led her out. I had to spend the entire morning knowing what was going to happen, hoping beyond hope I was wrong, and knowing that there was nothing, absolutely nothing I could do!" She wiped a tear away. "Lu, I'm so sorry, can you ever forgive me?"

"Ri, you've nothing to be sorry for." Luella told her as she joined her. "It wasn't your fault." She folded her arms around Rianne as something else occurred to her. "So that's why you can see through Glamoury. Caitlin told me about it before, that it works in opposition to Glamoury, it deals in truth and won't be fooled by a Glamourer's illusions. But it also can't be commanded like Glamoury, because truth is beyond manipulation." A bitter laugh. "Yeah, Caitlin? Try telling Lucius Malfoy that."

"Draco is going to pay for this." said Marlie, indignant. "He is going to pay!" She twirled round to face Deanna. "And whoever helped him! They're all going to pay when I get my hands on them!"

"Later." said Deanna softly. "Later. They'll keep. Lu won't." She checked her watch. "Lu, you'd better start packing before Snape turns up wanting to know where you are."

Luella let go of Rianne, nodding mutely. Moving slowly, trying to put off the inevitable moment, she began to put her things into her trunk. As she did so, Marlie

stepped forward and began to help her, followed by Deanna and then Rianne. Within minutes, she was ready to go. In the distance, the bell rang for the next lesson.

"Time's up." sighed Lu. "Oh god, I don't want to go!" She hid her face in her hands as Deanna stepped forward to comfort her.

"Come on." she said quietly. "We'll go with you. It's Defence Against the Dark Arts next anyway, not like we're missing anything important."

Luella recovered herself and gathered her things, putting on her cloak, slinging her bag over her shoulder, carefully trying to persuade Sooty to get into her basket, before turning to her trunk. And realising she'd never manage it without magic. She could have cried. So many things, so many trivial little acts that she'd taken for granted before, that were now rendered completely impossible. How on earth was she going to manage without magic?

Fortunately, Marlie sensed what was up, and one Levitation Charm later, had the heavy box hovering about a foot off the ground, ready to move.

Deanna turned to her friend. "Come on. Time to go. Glam yourself up. Show them you're not afraid."

Luella nodded and drew a Glamour around all four of them, one that made them look not like a disgraced schoolgirl and friends, but like a queen and her retinue. Even Rianne seemed to cheer up a little, although she obviously couldn't see the change.

"Ready?" asked Marlie.

"No." said Luella. "But I suppose I'll have to be. Come on. Let's hit the road." She took one last look around the little room that they called home, bidding it farewell and promising silently that she'd be back, some way, somehow. Then, taking a deep breath, she opened the door and left.

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The common room fell silent as they entered it. Luella's little performance before hadn't gone unnoticed, and it seemed that most of them now knew that Luella Martin was off. Well, they had to find out sooner or later, Luella reflected. After all, there wasn't much they could do to her know. But she did fear for her friends and what they'd have to deal with. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Ginny watching her with tears rolling down her cheeks, visibly trembling despite Lydia's whispered words of comfort. Once more, Luella felt a wave of hatred of Lucius Malfoy and all his kin. She wasn't too bothered about her own suffering, after all this was war. But Ginny didn't deserve to be caught up in the fallout.

Luella didn't look at Ginny for long. She didn't look at anyone. Let them think what they liked. Eyes fixed straight ahead, trying to ignore the stares, she made for the door.

Until Marlie spoke. "Wait up. There's just one thing I need to do before you go. It won't take long."

Luella stopped and turned to watch as Marlie stepped away from the little procession and walked over to her cousin. Draco got to his feet as she approached, looking suitably guilty and more than a little confused. For a moment, Marlie did nothing, just stood in front of him with a contemptuous look of disgust on her face which made her kinship with Narcissa Malfoy abundantly clear to anyone who cared to look. Draco backed off. But not far enough.

Without warning, Marlie reached back and dealt him a fierce slap which echoed around the common room and sent the boy staggering back, slipping over on his beanbag and collapsing into it. Rubbing his cheek, he looked despondently up at her.

"That was uncalled-for, Marls."

"I don't think so, Malfoy." Marlie's voice could have withered the Whomping Willow at a hundred paces. "You sicken me, *cousin*. The only good thing I can say about you is that at least you get it from your father and it's not from my side of the family. Now stay out of my way before I do something worse." She swept away from him and rejoined her friends. "Let's go."

Luella turned away and led them out of the common room. Slowly, normality began to descend once more on the Serpent's Nest. However, as they left the room, a buried memory began resurfacing in Deanna's mind. A thought that wouldn't go away. *He'd called her Marls...*

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Professor Snape was waiting for them as they arrived outside the school. Once they'd left the Nest, Luella had switched the Glamour to one of concealment, allowing them to move through the crowds unnoticed. Putting on a show for her fellow Slyths was one thing, but Luella had no desire to face the rather more hostile reaction she'd be likely to get from everyone else. Bravery was one thing, but stupidity was quite another.

Snape did not seem surprised by their sudden appearance.

"I thought you'd choose that method of arrival. Lucius has obviously yet to appreciate that even without a wand, you're still a force to be reckoned with." The smile of appreciation faded as he indicated the carriage before him. "Time to go, Luella."

Luella nodded, biting her lip. This was it. All theatrics over, this was stark reality. Going home. Expelled. Leaving. Really leaving. Malfoy might have been put in his place, but it didn't change things. He might be tormented by guilt, but she wouldn't be there to see it. Now she just faced a lonely journey home, and not much of a welcome when she got there. Granted, she wouldn't have to deal with furious parents, not if Caitlin had done her job properly, but it still wouldn't be much of a homecoming.

Marlie and Deanna saw her things into the carriage without a word, before her friends turning to face her. Marlie hugged her first, wishing her good luck and her telling not to worry, she'd give Malfoy the kicking of his life on her behalf. Next came Rianne, who once more whispered how sorry she was at not having been able to warn her,

before regaining a semblance of her old self and telling her to sit tight, she was going to start organising a campaign to Reinstate the Slytherin One and with any luck she might even be able to come back, but if not, at least she'd get lots of notoriety and be able to make millions by selling her story. Luella couldn't help laughing at that. Trust Rianne to see that side of things. Then finally Luella came to Deanna.

Neither of them said anything. Some things there just weren't words for. Instead they just hugged each other.

"See you later, mate." was all Deanna said.

"Count on it." Luella whispered back, before letting her go and giving her one last look before getting into the carriage. Snape closed the door behind her.

"You will come and visit, won't you?" Luella asked, choked by a sudden fear that he'd break his word, that the wounds of the distant and not-so-distant past would be too much for him.

She needn't have worried. Snape hid his scars well.

"You have my word." he promised, patting her hand gently as she leaned through the open window. "I promised I'd look after you and I will. You'll see me soon enough."

Luella smiled. One thing to look forward to anyway. "Take care of Deanna for me too, won't you? She's not as tough as she makes out."

Snape's expression softened in the way it always did when Deanna's name was mentioned. "I'll do everything I can for her. She'll be fine."

"Thanks." Luella said, a lump in her throat. A relief to know that when Deanna's anger faded and the reality hit home, that there'd be someone there for her, not that she'd really expected Snape to do anything else.

And then Snape was stepping back and motioning to the driver, and the carriage began to move. Her friends waved to her for as long as they could, but before long the carriage turned the corner and Luella was gone.

Silence fell on the little crowd gathered outside Hogwarts. It was done. Over. Luella was gone, and with no immediate prospect of return. A pallor of gloom descended as the shock began to wear off and the reality of it all sank in. Deanna in particular shuddered as the agony of parting finally hit home. She could almost sense the bond between them stretching further and further as Luella travelled away.

Seeming to sense that Deanna best needed solitude right now, Marlie and Rianne retreated to the school, leaving Deanna and Snape alone.

Deanna didn't react as Snape approached and put his arm round her. However, after a few moments, she reached out and clutched gratefully at his hand. They stayed like that for a few minutes more before Deanna finally spoke.

"I miss her."

"I know." came the response. "So do I."

"This is the furthest we've ever been apart, you know." she said. "We grew up together, went to school together, played together, came here together. We even went on holiday together half the time. Her parents felt sorry for me being on my own, so they'd invite me along. Mum'd always pay my way for me, and give me plenty of spending money. I didn't always go, but even those times, it never felt like it did now. I could always feel her there at some level, knew she wasn't really far away. Now though..." She shuddered once more, tears pricking at her eyes. "It feels like she's died or something. Feels like she's being torn away from me, and every step she takes is ripping part of me out with her..." She broke off at this point, hiding her eyes as a sob forced its way out of her. Snape turned her round and held her close to him, guessing only too well what it must feel like.

He waited while Deanna sobbed in his arms, angry, choking sobs that were as much hate for those who'd done this as they were for the pain of parting. It was catching too - the sound of his daughter sobbing raised his own anger towards Lucius Malfoy and anyone else who'd had a hand in this. *Damn you, Lucius. If only I could make you feel what I'm feeling now. But of course - you don't have a daughter, do you?* No, Lucius Malfoy most certainly didn't. Snape wondered if Draco inspired the same feelings of protective rage. Probably not, although that would also depend on Lucius having a heart.

It wasn't just anger on Deanna's behalf either. Already he was missing the young Redeemer. Half his age she might be, a student of his she might be, but in some ways she was almost an equal. Healer, confidant... friend. One tough enough not to run from darkness, gentle enough to love regardless, smart enough not to get caught up in things not her fate, at least he hoped so. Last thing he wanted was for his problems to ensnare her - she had enough of her own. Yet he grieved most keenly for the loss of someone to talk to, someone who listened, really listened, and didn't judge or demand anything in return. Who knew his secrets and did not run. It wasn't until you lost something that you realised just how much you needed it, was it?

"Do you know who it was?" The words brought his own thoughts to a halt. Deanna had broken away and was now watching him intensely.

"Who what was?" The question had caught him off-guard, and thinking about his dark secrets made him especially vulnerable to Deanna's gaze. He really didn't like the way she was looking at him at all.

"Who betrayed Lu."

That was better. Far safer ground. "No, Deanna, I have no idea. I suspect Draco Malfoy may have been involved, but you can hardly call his actions a betrayal. He is after all your enemy. You can't really blame him for using information that fell into his hands. However, his informant is another matter. Someone has been letting our secrets slip."

"Someone on our side." said Deanna thoughtfully.

"Indeed. I have no idea who though. But I'm sure you'll find out."

"Trust me. I will. I already have one lead." Deanna's eyes glimmered coldly and Snape gave silent thanks that Deanna was not directing her anger at him.

"Excellent. I can rely on you then to ensure that a suitable revenge is carried out?"

"You can."

"Wonderful. The usual caveats apply of course."

"What, you'll give me room to manoeuvre as long as I'm discreet?" grinned Deanna.
"Honestly sir, you're such a bad example to us sometimes."

Snape just shrugged. "There's times when these matters are best settled privately. I think you'll be safe, providing you have no witnesses."

"Right you are then, sir." Deanna looked at him again, this time rather more gently.
"Sir, will you really be visiting Lu?"

"Of course. I have to make sure she's pursuing her studies properly after all."

"Right, right. Just that... will you keep an eye on her for me? Make sure she's alright, that she's coping and stuff?"

Snape had to laugh at this. "You know, that's exactly what she asked me about you. Don't worry, child. I shall make sure that she is well at all times. She will be fine."

Deanna nodded and clutched his hand again with a smile. "Thanks, sir. You've been brilliant through all this."

"Not brilliant enough to save your friend." Snape said bitterly. Deanna tightened her grip.

"You did your best. I know you wouldn't let Lu go without a fight."

"Exactly. I went in fighting when cunning and artifice would have served me better. I know you're as committed to the warrior's path as your mother, but don't ever neglect the more common Slytherin ways, will you?"

"With you as teacher? Not likely." Deanna laughed. She became sombre almost immediately. "Better go in, I suppose. Face the school. Wonder if everyone knows yet."

"I believe the headmaster plans to make an announcement at lunchtime, but the staff already know."

"Damn, and I've got Lockhart next too." sighed Deanna. "And I'm already late."

"I'll make your excuses." Snape reassured her. "And now, let's go in. Time to start adjusting. It won't be easy, of that I have no doubt, but if you have any problems, if you need to talk, then you know where to find me."

Deanna smiled and nodded, allowing him to lead her inside, although her anxiety about the future had only been partly allayed. However, it was enough to know that she was not alone. Luella might be gone, but there would be help if she needed it. And so, drawing a breath, she prepared to face the music.

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Chapter Twenty Two Crime and Punishment

Deanna left him in the Entrance Hall, heading for her Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson with Lockhart. Severus pitied the poor girl. On top of the morning they'd all had, to have to put up with him next. It was as if fate couldn't resist heaping one last indignity on her.

However, his thoughts didn't stay with Deanna long. He'd almost made it to the dungeon entrance when a voice called his name.

"Ah, there you are Severus." He turned. It was Dumbledore.

"Headmaster." The temperature of his voice announced to anyone who cared to listen that he was not best pleased with his employer at the moment. But if it bothered the old wizard, he didn't show it.

"Well, it has been an interesting morning, has it not?" Dumbledore sounded as casual as if all that had happened had been a simple debate over the finer points of magical philosophy.

"If you say so, Headmaster." Severus did not look the older man in the eye. He didn't want even Dumbledore seeing how deep his wounds went.

"Indeed, Severus. A proper puzzle all this is. Here we have a perfectly well-adjusted young Muggle-born, with no magical antecedents whatsoever, bearing the Mark of the Tal-y-Rhys, and possessing their famed ability to talk to snakes." Dumbledore watched Severus carefully for a reaction and was gratified to see him flinch at the mention of the name of the Tal-y-Rhys. Concealing his own satisfaction, he decided to dig a little deeper. "And then the mystery deepens as Lucius Malfoy accuses her of doing something she's clearly innocent of and has her expelled, Jupiter knows why."

It was at this that Severus's self-control finally snapped.

"Ah, so you admit she's been framed!" he snarled, rounding on the Headmaster with murder in his eyes.

"Oh, of course Severus." Dumbledore replied, affable to the last. "That much is obvious. Question is, why? Why would Lucius Malfoy trouble to get an ordinary Muggle-born expelled? I know he's not overfond of them, but with the current troubles, there's really no need to do anything when the Heir could do it for him. And while he does indulge Draco, I doubt even Lucius would step in to get people expelled for him." Dumbledore's friendly exterior faded just a little as his eyes bored into the Potions master's. "Any thoughts, Severus?"

"Thoughts. He asks me for my thoughts." Severus laughed, anger overriding his usual diplomacy. "My thoughts, Headmaster? My thoughts are these. Do you have any idea what you have let happen? Do you have any idea what Malfoy has just done? Do you realise what is riding out of this school as we speak??"

"I've no idea, but I'm sure you'll enlighten me." said Dumbledore.

"A witch the like of whom has not been seen in Hogwarts since the school days of Medea Tyler and Minerva McGonagall." Severus raged at him. "Maybe not since the Founding. The future hope of us all. A witch of such power that one day the world will tremble at her passing and offer up its riches on a plate. And a witch of such humility that she'll no doubt blush with embarrassment and turn it down because she doesn't want the attention. She's caring, kindhearted, loyal, understanding, sensitive, generous... One of the most wonderful people I've ever known..." Severus broke off, unable to speak and unwilling to reveal the true extent of his pain. Unfortunately for him, Dumbledore knew him too well to be put off.

"I know how you felt about her, Severus." He placed a hand on his arm, a gesture of comfort which Severus found oddly touching despite its simplicity. "I know how close you were. She's a very special young witch, there is no doubt about that. I'm rather sad to see her depart myself, and not least because you need her as much she needs you."

Severus finally found the strength to answer. "It's so pitiful, isn't it? All it takes is a few words of kindness and treating me as if I'm not a complete monster, and I'm anybody's aren't I? Still, I'm up to three friends now. If I play my cards right, I might one day be able to count them on the fingers of two hands." He covered his eyes, shielding them from that too gentle gaze of Dumbledore's. "That's what gets me, Albus. It's not that Lucius has derailed Melissa's and my best-laid plans. It's not that he's deprived Slytherin of one of its brightest stars, and destabilised its internal hierarchy, possibly dangerously. It's that he's taken away one of my friends."

Dumbledore inhaled deeply, sadness in his eyes, but buried beneath, understanding. He took Severus by the elbow, indicating for the younger wizard to follow him.

"I'm sorry, Albus." said Severus, composing himself. "I know it's unprofessional, I know I shouldn't allow myself to get so close to one of my students, but I can't help myself. Can't help the way I feel."

"Understandable." Severus finally allowed himself to look Dumbledore in the eye and saw to his surprise that the old man was smiling. "She's no ordinary student after all. Not every day you have the Second Heir of Slytherin in your charge after all."

"What?" Severus gasped, horrified that the words had been spoken out loud so publicly. "Headmaster, keep your voice down! Anyone could be listening."

Dumbledore nodded, his suspicions confirmed. "As I thought. It's more than just a legend, and it's happening now. Which I knew anyway, but it's nice to hear it confirmed."

Severus was still trying to fathom out how the Headmaster had discovered what was meant to be a closely guarded secret. "But what... how... Who told you?" he demanded.

Dumbledore just smiled. "You're not the only one who got themselves involved with a Tal-y-Rhys. Come on, come back to my office and I'll tell you all about it."

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Severus settled himself into the high-backed leather chair opposite Dumbledore's, accepting the brandy the Headmaster offered him. He'd been about to decline, professional to the last, but then a little voice inside had suggested otherwise. He had a feeling that he might well need the brandy before this conversation was out. Making sure that the decanter was within easy reach, he settled himself for what promised to be an interesting next half hour.

"So which Tal-y-Rhys were you involved with then?" he asked with a wry grin. "Please don't tell me it was Medea Tyler. I don't think I could deal with knowing you were Caitlin Tyler's father."

"Of course not Severus, don't be silly." Dumbledore paused, watching Severus closely, waiting for the relief to reach its peak and the moment of total relaxation to set in. "I'm her grandfather."

It was really rather gratifying to see the normally controlled Potions Master begin choking, spluttering, going red in the face and downing his brandy in one, before reaching for the decanter and pouring another, then downing that one too. Mean, but gratifying. Serve him right for not letting me in on it sooner, Dumbledore thought to himself.

"You're... her... grandfather?" Severus finally forced the words out.

"Oh yes." Dumbledore confirmed. "Charybdis Tyler and I were married for twenty years." Here, his mood turned sombre. "Gods know how though. It was alright at first, but she was a lot younger than me, and although she'd been a fiercely independent young thing when I met her, she started getting broody after a while. Turned out to be the usual story, she wanted children, I felt I was too old for that sort of thing, we argued, I buried myself in my work, we drifted apart and finally she forced the issue by getting herself pregnant. Of course, I then stupidly went and told her I didn't want a child, had made that perfectly clear on many occasions and couldn't she get rid of it. Yes, Severus, I know now it was a stupid thing to say. And yes I have regretted it many, many times since." The old man sighed, sadness creeping back in but for his own problems now. "I regretted it as soon as I'd said it. I regretted it even more when

Carrie ran off crying and locked herself in our bedroom all night. And nothing prepared me for how I felt when she came down the next morning, perfectly composed and announced she was leaving. She did too. Just packed her things and went back to the manor. Filed for divorce a few weeks later and refused to speak to me ever again. I never did see our daughter, not until she started Hogwarts. I didn't tell her I was her father. Carrie would have murdered me, I'm sure. Besides, I felt I didn't deserve it after the way I'd treated her mother. So I just watched over her, watched her grow into a beautiful, intelligent young woman, just like her mother, but with more than a few similarities to me. She had the same headstrong bravado that I'd had as a boy, the same reckless warrior courage, the fiery temper that Caitlin and Deanna both seem to have inherited..."

"So that's your fault, is it?" Severus interrupted. "So next time I find Deanna pouncing on some unsuspecting young Hufflepuff I can blame you, can I?"

Dumbledore laughed. "I can see I've let myself in for an interesting time for telling you all this! But really, Severus, I can't see Deanna pouncing for no reason. Not her style at all. If she starts savaging someone, they've more than likely earned it. And I'm sure it will be done in private. She is a Slytherin after all, and she has your sense of cold-blooded cunning."

"Why thank you, Albus..." Severus began before stopping and cursing to himself. Another secret revealed. Dumbledore just smiled that same bittersweet little smile.

"Yes Severus, I do know that as well. You think I've not seen the way you watch her and guessed the cause? I remember all too well watching Medea in the same way and not being able to do anything. And of course she looks far more like you than Medea ever did to me. I was already an old man by the time Medea arrived here - you're still young."

"I don't feel it." Severus said softly. "I can't tell her and if she ever finds out it'll destroy her. Her mother won't kill me, but she just might."

"She won't." Dumbledore paused, a flicker of anxiety appearing in his eyes. "Will she?"

"She's liable to do something crazy, as you surely know only too well." Severus said, flicking Dumbledore a look of something that could have been anger or coldness or contempt. It was difficult to tell with Slytherins. "Gryffindor passion mixed with Slytherin ruthlessness. Anything could happen."

"It could indeed." Dumbledore appeared mildly alarmed, before disappointment reasserted itself. "All the same, I would still like to see the two of you reconciled. That family's had a history of girls growing up never knowing their fathers, I'd like to see the pattern broken. Medea never knew me as her father, Caitlin lost hers when she was only three, and now we have Deanna fatherless too. I feel somehow responsible for starting the whole thing off, and I'd like to see it ended in my lifetime if possible."

"Some chance." Severus laughed bitterly.

"Well, you never know. But I will say this - as one who's been there before you, I'm here for you. If you ever need to talk, come and find me." Dumbledore's sadness lifted as he changed the subject. "And now back to the matter in hand. Young Luella, the Slytherin Redeemer. Don't fret, it's not widely known. But Carrie was always one for researching her family history, and told me all about it and the true history of the Tal-y-Rhys. It was her hope and her fear, that it would come in her lifetime, or that of her child. Well, she was right." he sighed, grief flitting across his face once more. "Her daughter certainly saw it happen, and it cost her her life. But that was then, and I like to think Medea's last sacrifice helped make it safe for the Redeemer to grow up, without the menace of the First Heir hanging over her."

"I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure, will we?" Severus asked half-heartedly. "Caitlin was the only adult survivor of that night and she wasn't there when the Dark Lord killed Potter and her mother - Melissa told me that Caitlin and Lily had already fled with the children when he stormed the house."

"True, true, but no one kills the Lady of Tal-y-Rhys on her home ground without her collusion in the matter, and the only reason I can think of for that is if she planned for her death to activate a spell that would ensure her child and grandchild were protected from harm."

"I thought you said it was Lily's death that made Potter able to survive Voldemort's attack?" Severus pointed out.

"Oh, most certainly. But many people died defending children or other loved ones, and that never stopped Voldemort. Lily managed it, and I don't think that it was a coincidence that the Tal-y-Rhys were involved. But it doesn't matter now." Dumbledore returned his concentration to the matter in hand. "Our main concern must be for the living. What arrangements have you made for her?"

"Caitlin's collecting her." Severus replied. "We plan for her to stay at the Tylers' until summer - it's no Tal-y-Rhys Manor, but it's still well shielded from possible attack or Ministry interference. She'll keep studying there, and if she's not reinstated by next year, we're sending her to New Hogwarts."

"An excellent plan." said Dumbledore approvingly. "Of course, if things carry on as they are, it could be that a lot more students could be attending New Hogwarts next year. But it won't come to that, I am sure. I think that the Redeemer will be needed here again before the year is out, and I think she will succeed in clearing her name. I don't think you need worry, Severus."

"All the same, it seems a long way off at the moment." Severus replied, his anxiety showing through as he began to chew one of his fingernails. Worry finally getting the better of him, he took his hand from his mouth and pounded the desk. "Damn it, Albus, why did you let her get expelled at all? Don't tell me you couldn't have prevented it somehow! Had you thought to warn her, we could have worked out some kind of strategy! Couldn't she have gone up against the Heir equally, if not more, effectively based here? What use is she two hundred miles away?" he snarled at the other wizard.

"She may not be much 'use' as you put it, Severus," Dumbledore retorted, "but she is safe from harm. You're too upset to appreciate this at the moment, but the situation is far from bleak. She's out of reach of the Heir for now, and her other enemies now consider her neutralised, which means she faces no further danger. She is also now to be taught exclusively by Caitlin and your good self. I don't know what you're planning, but the chances of Caitlin sticking to the usual curriculum are remote, to say the least. She's going to be receiving the best Defence Against the Dark Arts education you could hope to find. Think about it, Severus. She's going to be spending the next three months being taught by the best. By the time she does return, she won't know herself and neither will anyone else. She'll have gone as low as she can, and fought her way back, and that is an incredible psychological boost to anyone. I personally think that no matter how black it looks now, she will be many times stronger in the long run. If the experience doesn't break her, it will turn her into a queen among witches. And her disarming of whoever is really causing the attacks will be all the more effective if he thinks she's no longer a threat."

"Yes," Severus murmured thoughtfully, "yes I think it will. Albus, you may well be right."

"Of course I am, Severus." said Dumbledore comfortingly, before switching on his reproving face. "I must say though, things are truly awry when a Slytherin, especially you of all people, needs a Gryffindor to lecture him on strategy."

"Albus, please." said Severus, a touch testily. Dumbledore's expression did not change in the slightest.

"I also have yet to hear an explanation for why you and Melissa Lovegood never bothered to inform me about Luella earlier."

Severus began squirming underneath that unforgiving gaze. Why, he cursed himself, hadn't he gone with his own intuition when Mel had first told him? Damn the woman, and damn him for listening to her. Ah well. Her idea, her job to take the rap.

"Sorry, Albus." He cast his eyes to the floor, trying to look suitably penitent. "It was Mel's idea. She wasn't happy about non-Slytherins knowing the legends. She wanted it kept quiet, on a strictly need-to-know basis. I was all for telling you, but she wasn't keen on the idea."

Dumbledore seemed only a little mollified. "Well, I suppose she wasn't to know I'd been married to a Tal-y-Rhys - after all, the divorce came through twenty years before she'd even been born. However, that's no excuse. I shall have to have words with her next time I see her." The stern teacher look passed. "And now it merely remains to find out who betrayed our young Redeemer. Severus, can I leave the matter in your hands?"

Severus nodded. "Of course. Your great-granddaughter is already investigating and I feel sure we shall have the matter duly dealt with."

"Good, good." Dumbledore sighed. "You will rein her in, won't you? I know you can heal most injuries, but bringing students back from the dead is beyond even your capabilities."

"I'll do my best." Severus promised. "I think I can convince my overexcitable offspring that it's more fun to leave him alive with the pain. She'll like that idea."

Dumbledore winced. "Now you can't lay that at my door!"

Severus just smiled. "I take full responsibility for the sadism. I'm rather proud of that, it's taken me ages to cultivate."

Dumbledore shook his head as he got up to show Severus out. "Severus, I've known you a long time and I think I can safely call you a friend. But this I tell you, as long as I live, I will never understand Slytherins."

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As Dumbledore spoke those words, another former Gryffindor was also demonstrating a total inability to understand Slytherins. Except, unlike Dumbledore, this one didn't have the insight or humility to admit it. It was of course Gilderoy Lockhart.

The Slytherin fourth year had already settled in when Deanna arrived. Luella's absence had been duly noted, and those not already familiar with the situation had soon been filled in. And when Deanna made an entrance, Lockhart was already in full flow on the matter.

"Ah, Miss Tyler!" he grinned at her as she slid into the nearest chair. "Take a seat. I was just passing the good news on to your classmates."

"Good news?" The tone of voice should have alerted Lockhart. It didn't. "What good news."

Lockhart ignored the note of danger in the girl's voice, the note that had immediately had all the other Slytherins reaching for their wands and getting ready to dive under the desk, and Marlie and Rianne getting ready to pounce if need be.

"Why, the news about the Heir of Slytherin, of course!" Lockhart beamed.

"Go on." said Deanna calmly. Too calmly. Behind her, Chris Bryant and Geoff Foxworth began to slink under their desk, so as to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

"It is my pleasure to inform you that there will be no more attacks!" Lockhart announced, merrily oblivious to the fact that his entire class was looking for cover and edging well away from him. "They've caught the Heir of Slytherin!"

"I see." Deanna's voice was getting stonier by the second. It wasn't quite Avebury yet, but it was well on its way to Stonehenge.

"Yes indeed!" Here, finally, Lockhart's beam faded into moralising sadness. "It is with great sadness that I have to inform you that it was one of your classmates that was responsible. Luella Martin was behind it all along. Even now, punishment has been duly exacted and she's on her way home." He sighed with a melodramatic flourish. "I always suspected she was up to no good. Knew it as soon as I first laid eyes on her. Said as much to Professor Dumbledore at the time. You mark my words, I said to him, the girl's trouble. Up to something, no doubt about it. You watch her, there's something fundamentally untrustworthy about her, I said to him. Of course, I was about to expose her myself, but fortunately for us all, the Headmaster has finally taken action himself and made this school safe once more. Yes, I'm pleased to say that that particular menace has been dealt with once and for all..."

He didn't get the chance to say anything further. Deanna, unable to take any more, had jumped to her feet, snatched up her bag and was now striding purposefully out of the classroom. Ignoring Lockhart's puzzled calls, she kicked the door open and left.

Rianne and Marlie watched her go, before exchanging worried glances. Now what, Rianne seemed to be saying to Marlie. Marlie bit her lip, torn between staying to support Lockhart and going after her friend. She began to finger her necklace anxiously, before coming to a decision. Grabbing her own things, she too got to her feet and left.

Rianne smiled, a thin, humourless smile, but nevertheless one with its own sense of satisfaction. Nonchalant as ever, she collected her things and strolled after her friends.

This decided the rest of the class. As one, they too got to their feet and walked out in silence, not one of them sparing a look for their confused teacher.

As the last of the Slytherins walked out, Lockhart could only stare at their backs in bewilderment.

"Was it something I said?"

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Marlie caught up with Deanna soon enough.

"Deanna, wait!" she shouted as her friend reached the stairs. "Wait up!"

Deanna stopped, turning to face the other girl. Marlie skidded to a halt at once. She'd been prepared for a range of emotions on Deanna's face. Pain. Tears. Sadness. Anger at Lockhart. But not hate. Not the malice she saw there. Certainly not directed at her.

"Deanna?" she asked, beginning to wonder whether this had been such a good idea. "What's up?"

"What's up, she asks me." Deanna said, her voice still soft and dangerous. "My best friend's been expelled, I have to put up with that tosswit going on about what a bad influence she is, and to cap it all, my other best mate turns out to be the one that shopped her."

Marlie frowned, quite unable to understand what Deanna was on about.. "You what?"

"You heard me."

Marlie scratched her head, still in the dark. "But that's absurd, Rianne wouldn't do something like that, she's as loyal to Lu as you are."

Deanna took a step forward, murder in her eyes. "Exactly."

Marlie backed off, suddenly afraid. "Deanna, what are you saying... oh!" It dawned on her what Deanna meant. If not Rianne, that only left... her. And with that realisation, the fear dissolved as first shock and then furious indignation that Deanna would even think about accusing her came rushing to the fore. "Hey now, it was not me!" she yelled. "I mean, for Gods' sake, Tyler, she was my friend too, how on earth you could even think it might have been me is beyond me. Bloody hell Tyler, I know you're upset, but how paranoid are you, that your first guess has to be me??"

"Not you, eh?" Deanna stepped forward and with one swift move, pinned Marlie to the wall. "Then tell me something, *Marls*." She spat the name at her. "Since when have you and Draco Malfoy been friends, hmm? Hmm?" She gave Marlie a shake. "Don't think I was fooled by that little display in the common room! Covering your tracks, were you? Making sure suspicion wouldn't fall on you by demonstrating you hated him? Come on, Lovegood, I was not born yesterday!"

"I'm not scared of you, Tyler." Marlie hissed. "I'm not some little first year you can intimidate into confessing. I'm your equal, and you know it. Now you can believe me or not, but don't threaten me, because I don't scare easily!"

"Shame." snarled Deanna. "Had you been scared, you might have kept quiet like you swore you would." She increased the pressure, forcing Marlie right up against the wall. True to her word, Marlie responded by glaring back and grasping Deanna's wrists, trying to force her away. A struggle of wills ensued, and things could have turned nasty had Rianne not arrived on the scene.

"Tyler!" she yelled, unable to believe what she was seeing. "What the hell are you doing?"

Deanna released Marlie, who immediately stood back, rubbing her neck and gasping for breath, feeling the indignation-fuelled adrenaline begin to subside, leaving her shaky and more than a little frightened. Deanna in this sort of mood was capable of anything. She just hoped Rianne would be able to smooth things over.

"It's her, Ri." Deanna said, shaking all over herself. "She grassed Lu up to Malfoy."

Rianne turned swiftly to Marlie. "Is this true?"

"No!" snapped Marlie. "I did no such thing, never have and never will. Ri, talk some sense into her, the girl's nuts."

Rianne nodded, seemingly persuaded and turned back to Deanna. "There you go, Tyler. She says she's not guilty. Good enough for you?"

Deanna did not seem convinced. "Then explain why her and Draco are so friendly lately."

"Are they?" said Rianne. "I hadn't noticed. So when did you realise that, then?"

Clever, thought Marlie. Very clever. Getting Deanna to give her evidence without winding her up. Smooth move, Ri.

"Over the holidays." said Deanna. "Draco slipped up and called her Marls while he was looking at the Firebolts. When I challenged him, he just brushed me off by saying she was family and he could call her what he liked. I meant to ask about it, but I forgot. This morning, he called her Marls again, after she'd slapped him. That's when I remembered and realised I'd never got an answer earlier. Ri, she's been mates with him for gods know how long, she knows all about Lu, all it would take would be one slip-up and he'd know!"

"I didn't do it, Deanna." Marlie whispered. "You've got to believe me, I never said a thing to him! Intentionally or otherwise. I promise."

"I believe you." Rianne said calmly. "But there's still this little problem with Malfoy to be resolved. Deanna raises a valid point. Why *is* he using your first name all of a sudden? An explanation would be nice at this point, Marls."

Marlie looked from one to the other. Now here was something she'd rather they hadn't noticed. Damn Malfoy. Why couldn't he have been a little more discreet? However, it looked like she wasn't getting away without an explanation. Rianne and Deanna's brand of Nice Slyth, Nasty Slyth wasn't fun by any means.

"OK, OK." she sighed. "I suppose you'd have found out sooner or later. He used to come round to my house over summer."

She heard Rianne inhale sharply and Deanna laugh in triumph. "See? Told you!"

"Tyler, hear her out." Rianne said firmly. "Go on. Tell us more."

"There's not much to tell." said Marlie quietly. "It started one afternoon in July. Doorbell rings, Sukey goes to answer it, says it's for me. I ask who it is, she says it's Draco Malfoy. I tell her to get rid of him, and he goes away. For the time being. But he comes back a few days later. Again, I tell him to get lost. He goes. But comes back. That time, I go out to see him myself. We argue. I tell him he's not wanted. He pouts and refuses to leave, giving me all this crap about us being family, how can I possibly be so cold-hearted, you know what he's like."

Rianne and Deanna both nodded, knowing exactly what Malfoy was like. Despite themselves, they were both beginning to smile.

"Well, anyway," Marlie continued, "it went on like that, and I think I might have been able to get rid of him even then. Until my dad turned up..."

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"Malfoy, I'm warning you!" Marlie said through gritted teeth. "Go away or else! I've got dispensation to use magic at home, you know, I can hex your arse if I need to!"

Draco pouted. "That's no way to talk to your only cousin, Marlie. Come on, cous, where's your manners? All I want to do is hang out. You know, spin a few tunes, watch a movie, make polite conversation over a few soft drinks, that sort of thing. The kind of thing friends get up to every day."

"We are not," Marlie hissed, "friends! And you are not my only cousin either, I've got three on my dad's side, and you rank well below all of them in my estimation!"

"Not mages though are they?" Draco returned, confidently. Rather too confidently, as a triumphant Marlie proved.

"Actually, yes they are." she cooed. "Rachel and Paul Clearwater, Ravenclaw, soon to be third years. And Penelope Clearwater, soon to be fifth year, also a Ravenclaw. See Malfoy, unlike your family, we like Muggles and mages getting together. Not only did my dad marry a witch, but his sister married a wizard. Now please go away, I've got Laetitia Vetinari's Discmage on the go, and something else for my mum."

"What's that then?" asked Draco, only half-interested. "Quill with feathers that fly out and turn into poison darts?"

"No. Rings with radioactive gemstones." lied Marlie. Wouldn't hurt to have a little misinformation creep back to Lucius Malfoy, after all. Nice quill idea though, she'd have to look into that one.

"Remind me never to buy any jewellery off you then." Draco smirked, before frowning a little. "So what's radioactivity, then? I take it it's not something to do with being able to receive the Muggle Top 40 on your earrings."

Another good idea. Malfoy did have his uses after all.

"No, Malfoy." said Marlie tartly. "It isn't. Now have you quite done bothering me?"

"Not yet, cous. I've got the whole day ahead of me." Draco grinned.

Marlie would have hit back but at that moment things went from bad to worse as Leonard Lovegood arrived.

"Have we got visitors, Marlie? I thought I heard the doorbell go."

"It's nothing, Dad." Marlie called back frantically. "Just someone from school."

"Someone from school?" His interest caught, Leonard hastened to his daughter's side. "Don't keep them waiting on the doorstep then, invite them in! Honestly, teenagers today." He turned to Draco with a smile. "Hello there! So you're from Hogwarts too, are you? I'm Leonard Lovegood, Marlie's father. Pleased to meet you." He extended a hand, which Draco shook warmly.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Lovegood." Draco released his hand and bowed. "Draco Malfoy at your service."

"He is well-mannered, isn't he?" smiled Leonard. "I must say, Marlie, you do have some fascinating friends. Why haven't you introduced me to this one before? Well, well, come in Draco. Have a cup of coffee or a drink, make yourself at home. I know not all of your kind are used to Muggle homes, but I assure you there's plenty of magical stuff here too so you won't feel entirely out of place, and we've got an excellent house-elf if you need anything." He indicated for Draco to follow him in.

"Thank you, Mr. Lovegood." murmured Draco. "It will be a pleasure." Smirking at a dismayed Marlie, he sauntered in as if he'd lived there all his life.

Marlie could only glare at her cousin. As soon as her father's back was turned, she rounded on him.

"Right, you. You might have wormed your way into my dad's good books, but I still don't trust you. Any funny business, any misbehaviour, and you're out, OK?"

Draco looked at her with wounded eyes. "Marls, you disappoint me. Surely you don't believe me completely lacking in social graces? As a guest in your home, I promise to behave impeccably."

"You'd better." Marlie warned him. "Or you're gone."

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To Marlie's surprise, Draco behaved admirably, and was far less thrown by all the Muggle technology than she'd thought. The quarter of Muggle genes was obviously stronger than she'd given him credit for.

It didn't hurt, however, that the first room she took him to was the kitchen. As Sukey's domain, this was one of the few rooms in the house that looked just like its mage equivalent, with a huge black stove, an open fire with a bubbling cauldron, pots and pans hanging from the roof, big wooden tables and ingredients everywhere. However, even here there were signs that all was not as it seemed. Down one side of the room was a Muggle worktop with a fridge, blender, kettle, toaster and microwave, along with a bread bin and a biscuit tin, and a few scattered pieces of Muggle cutlery. This was the space the family used to produce snacks. Draco raised an eyebrow, evidently struck by the contrast.

"Interesting, very interesting." Draco commented. "So, is the entire house this schizophrenic or is it just the kitchen having an identity crisis?"

"Shut it, Malfoy." snapped Marlie sourly. "Do you want a drink or not?"

"I suppose so." sighed Draco. "Get me one of your bizarre Muggle concoctions then."

Muttering, Marlie reached inside the fridge and pulled out a can of Coke, before opening a nearby cupboard and pulling out a glass.

"Ice?" she asked, although her voice could have chilled the drink on its own.

"If you don't mind."

"Ice, please, Sukey."

A handful of ice cubes immediately appeared in the glass. Marlie handed it to him with the Coke can and leant back, a sadistic smile on her face. This was going to be fun. Draco was looking at the can very dubiously.

"There's meant to be liquid in this?"

Marlie nodded. "Oh yes. Once you get it open, it just pours out."

"Well thank you very much." snapped Draco. "You are the epitome of helpfulness, you know that?"

"I do try." Marlie smirked as Draco puzzled over it, setting the glass down on the workbench as he tried to figure out how to get his can open. Unfortunately for Marlie, Draco was neither stupid nor afraid to experiment, and a few minutes later, had mastered the art of ringpulls.

"Sweet Coca-Cola, you shall be mine!" Draco gloated as he poured the contents into his glass, watching it fizz up. "Gods, look at it, it's like one of Professor Snape's potions. Hope it doesn't taste like it." He took a sip and smiled. A proper smile, too, not a sneer or a smirk. Genuine pleasure.

"Like it?" Marlie asked.

"Like it?" Draco lowered the glass and looked at Marlie, all scorn gone to reveal a completely different Draco Malfoy, one she'd never seen before and hadn't even known existed. A Draco innocent, carefree... happy. "It's fantastic. That does it, Marls, I'm coming over here every day from now on. Just keep me in Coca-Cola, and I shall be all yours."

"Oh gods." moaned Marlie. "What did I do to deserve that?" But oddly enough, she found she wasn't feeling that bad about the prospect.

Draco took another sip. "So, what do you do for fun around here?"

Marlie thought. She wasn't ready to let him see her workroom, not just yet. However, there were other ways of keeping him entertained.

"How do you fancy watching a blue hedgehog on speed chase around a fantasy landscape after little golden rings?"

Draco looked at her but reined in the first remark that came to mind. It could be a Muggle thing, he told himself. Best not make a fool of oneself.

"Go on then, Lovegood. Initiate me into the lunacy."

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"So we spent the afternoon playing Sonic on my Megadrive." Marlie finished. "He didn't stay for dinner, said his parents expected him back and he didn't want to be late or they'd start asking awkward questions about where he'd been. He didn't think they'd approve of him coming round to my place."

"Who'd have thought it." commented Deanna. "I've got something in common with Malfoy's parents."

"Tyler!" snapped Marlie. "Leave it out. I keep telling you, it was different. He was different. He wasn't at all like he is in school. He was actually alright. Still sarcastic, but he was witty sarcastic not cruel sarcastic. He was nice to my dad, both to his face and behind his back." Marlie started to go misty-eyed as she recalled the summer gone by. "I spent the entire holiday educating him about Muggles and their ways, and he loved it. He used to spend hours with my dad asking about how things worked and what he did for a living. You should have seen his face when Dad told him he worked on aircraft engines, he couldn't wait to hear more. He wasn't putting it on, I'd swear to it. We'd spend ages playing computer games, listening to music, watching videos, or just talking. I took him out to Exeter a few times too, got him some Muggle clothes and some CDs, took him to the cinema, even took him to a football match once although he didn't think much of it. Can't say I blame him." Marlie sniffed. "But Tyler, while he was with me, he was a completely different person. Like he didn't have to pretend or keep up an image of hating all things Muggle. Like he was secretly fascinated by it all and was finally able to indulge without anyone knowing. He told me himself that hanging around at my place was much better than being at home. Reckoned it was far more interesting. Said it made a change being able to act like a kid for once. You know, he's not all he seems. We had a great time over summer. We had fun, y'know? We got on. We were almost... friends." Here Marlie cast her eyes down. "I thought we were friends."

"Rule number one, Marlie." Deanna said, showing very little sympathy for her. "Never trust a Malfoy."

"Don't I know it. Bastard." laughed Marlie. "We get back to school and it's as if none of it ever happened. I'm back less than a week, and what happens? Cheating bastard goes and steals my job." She stared Deanna straight in the eyes, with a ferocity that caused even her to start. "Do you really think after that, that I'd betray Lu to him? That's why losing out to him hurt so much. I really thought he wasn't all bad. Really thought we were mates. Then he goes and stabs me in the back. Damn him. I feel so used." Marlie fell silent and looked away, wanting nothing more than to be alone with her misery.

Deanna watched her, and in that moment, felt the hostility fade away. She couldn't stay angry with Marlie for long, not seeing her so betrayed in her turn. She also believed that Marlie probably hadn't said anything to Malfoy. She hadn't missed the phrase Marlie had used, "...almost friends."

"Marls, don't." Deanna tried to console her, stepping forward and putting an arm round her. "He's Malfoy, that's what he's like. It's not your fault."

"I didn't tell him." Marlie whispered, sounding like she was trying very hard not to cry. "I never said a word about Lu, I swear. I never said, and he never asked."

"I believe you." said Deanna softly, just softly enough for Marlie to hear her. "I'm sorry."

Marlie didn't say anything, just sniffled a bit, before turning to Deanna and giving her a hug. The two of them stayed like that for a while, until Deanna finally let Marlie go and stepped back with a wry grin.

"Just out of interest, what sort of thing did you and Malfoy find to talk about?"

Marlie blushed at this and started to look rather sheepish. When she did speak it was in a very small voice that Deanna had to strain to hear.

"Erm... we spent most of the time talking about the finer points of Bagpuss and comparing the relative merits of Rainbow and Button Moon."

Deanna couldn't help herself. The laughter just forced itself out, and she doubled up in a fit of the giggles which lasted for a good minute. Finally, she composed herself.

"Damn, Marls, that's just sad enough to be true. Oh dear. Draco Malfoy liking Bagpuss. Who'd have thought it."

"So I take it you two are friends again then." came Rianne's voice. Both girls jumped at the sound of her voice. They'd forgotten she was there. But there she certainly was, leaning against the wall, watching them with a smile.

Marlie looked at Deanna. Deanna looked at Marlie. They both turned to Rianne.

"Looks like it."

"Guess so."

"If she cuts out the psychopathic episodes, I'll cut down on the narcissism and obsessing over kids TV."

"You got yourself a deal, Marls." They both shook hands. Rianne breathed a sigh of relief.

"Excellent. You two had me worried for a while there. When I saw you two at each other's throats, just about ready to kill each other..."

"Less of the we, thank you." Marlie interrupted. "There was only one of us intent on murdering anyone and it wasn't me."

"Yes, well, be that as it may." Rianne continued. "For a while there, I thought we'd gone back to the bad old days, and with Lu gone we just can't afford any serious fallings out. You two got me?" She gave them both very piercing looks.

"Got it." Marlie nodded.

"I hear ya, Ri." Deanna sighed. "I was out of line, I know, it's just that what with everything that's happened this morning, my nerves are stretched to breaking point and I'm just not sure what to think about anything any more. I didn't think Lu'd ever get expelled, but she did, and it's just thrown me. I mean, right now anything could be possible, and I just wasn't thinking clearly. Went off at the first possible suspicion and got it wrong." She looked guiltily away. "Sorry, Marls."

"Eh, not to worry." Marlie shrugged. "I'll let it go." She narrowed her eyes. "This time. Don't do it again."

"I won't." Deanna promised.

"That's alright then." said Marlie, still a little miffed but willing to overlook it.

"And now your little quarrel's in the past," said Rianne, "perhaps we can now get back to finding out who really did tell on Lu, using our brains rather than our adrenal glands." This was said with a rather pointed look in Deanna's direction. "Now Deanna, if you'd been thinking, you'd have realised that whoever it was must know about Lu being a Parselmouth and having the Mark. This rules out Marls, on the grounds that none of us, Lu included, knew she had Parseltongue until the Duelling Club, and there was no Mark until last Halloween. By that time, Marlie's friendship with Draco was long over as he'd pinched her job. No way is she going to have anything to do with him after that. So it's someone else. So, who else other than us four, knew about the Mark and the Parseltongue?"

"Well, Snape I suppose." said Deanna dubiously.

"Hardly going to be him, is it?" Marlie scoffed. "Why not say Dumbledore and have done?"

"Not him." said Rianne. "Or any other adult. It's a student. So, out of all the students at Hogwarts other than us, who knew? Who does Lu trust enough to let in on something like that?"

"There's Penny, but it can't be her, she's been Petrified." said Marlie thoughtfully. "Apart from her, the only other people Lu's close to are Harry and Hermione."

"Not Harry." said Deanna. "He just doesn't do that. He's too honest, and he likes Lu enough to give her the benefit of the doubt. If he suspected her, he'd come to us first and make enquiries."

"But he does know about the Parseltongue - Lu did say she'd let it slip to him." Marlie pointed out.

"All the same though, Harry Potter just does not betray his friends like that." said Deanna.

"No, but he doesn't keep secrets from them either." Rianne said, now beginning to look very thoughtful indeed. "First thing he'd do would be to tell Hermione and Ron."

"Well, it's not Hermione." said Marlie confidently. "She'd go to a teacher if she thought something was up. She certainly wouldn't have anything to do with Malfoy, and he wouldn't listen to her any way."

"Which just leaves..." Deanna looked at her two friends as the same thought occurred to all three of them at once. Speaking in unison, they all named the one revealed as the villain of the piece.

"Ron."

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"It's him. It must have been." panted Rianne as she ran to keep up with Deanna, who was striding ahead, wand out, expression grim. "He was there that day we talked about what was up with Lu. Overheard us. Deanna, he must have heard us mention that her arm kept hurting!"

"I know." said Deanna.

"What are you going to do to him?" asked Marlie, a few paces behind her, sounding just a little too enthralled by the prospect of Ron getting a good kicking.

"I don't know. Something painful."

"There isn't going to be... blood is there?" Marlie asked.

"Maybe."

Marlie digested the thought for a moment before smiling. "Cool."

Meanwhile, the news about Luella had not been slow to travel, and it had by now reached Gryffindor House. Harry and his two friends were making their way across the Entrance Hall on their way to lunch, too shocked to speak. At least, Harry was. Ron, on the other hand, was trailing behind, squirming uncomfortably and trying not to look too shift.

Hermione was doing her best to comfort Harry.

"She didn't do it, Harry. She can't have done, she's not like that."

"Won't bring her back." Harry whispered.

"But if she's innocent, she'll appeal, she has to." said Hermione, doing her best to boost his confidence. "She'll be back before you know it."

Harry just laughed. "You think so? Mione, if the justice system round here worked, she'd still be here." He stared at his feet. "She's gone, Herm. Gone. For good. I'll never see her again." He buried his head in his hands. "God, I miss her."

Ron bit his lip. He'd never stopped to think how Harry would feel about Luella leaving. He'd been far too concerned with getting rid of her and banishing her influence. He'd just assumed that once she'd gone, things would be back to normal and it would be just the three of them again, without Harry dropping everything and running over to talk to her as soon as the Slytherin put in an appearance. How wrong he'd been. Luella's presence was still hanging in the air, and it was all the more bizarrely tangible for her not being there physically. What have I done, he thought. What the hell have I done? He's still thinking about her, except now he's miserable too. Well done, Ron.

He tried to shake the vision of Luella Martin's eyes accusing him. No good. Still there, tormenting him, waking his conscience from hibernation, sending him headfirst into a guilt trip. I'm sorry, he thought to himself. This was wrong. The uneasy notion came unbidden, that maybe the Second Heir legend was true after all. Maybe it wasn't the real attacker he'd got expelled at all, but the one hope for defeating them. Shivering, he edged that bit closer to Hermione. Last thing he wanted was for his stupidity to do any more damage to their group.

And then all three noticed something that made them all look up. The crowd of students around them had all stopped talking and were moving very swiftly away, those that weren't being pushed to one side.

"What the hell...?" said Harry, bemused.

Hermione stared into the distance, frowning. "It's as if they're all trying to get out of the way of something. Or maybe someone."

Ron felt his blood freeze at this. Slowly, very slowly, he turned to see what the other students were running away from. And felt his heart start pounding as he saw them.

The crowd was parting as if divided by some enigmatic unstoppable force. And that force consisted of Deanna Tyler elbowing her way through, with Marlie Lovegood and Rianne Stormosi flanking her. All three had their wands out, and all had very determined expressions on their faces. Determined to the point of ruthlessness. Ron locked eyes with Deanna and in that moment realised. They knew.

He didn't waste any time. As soon as Deanna's eyes met his, her face twisting into a snarl, his body sprang into action. Quite involuntarily, his legs turned him around and started carrying him off, trying to put as much distance between him and Deanna as possible.

Seeing this, the Slytherin phalanx broke.

"Get him." Deanna hissed, breaking into a run herself, with her friends hot on her heels.

Panicking, Ron bolted for the door. If he could just make it to the Great Hall, with teachers and prefects around, he'd be safe. He almost made it too. With longer legs than the three girls, he was able to make the most of his head start and was nearly there.

Until Draco Malfoy appeared out of nowhere, standing between him and the doorway with his foot outstretched. Ron, going too fast to stop, tripped and found himself sprawling on the ground.

Deanna wasted no time. Ignoring Draco, who slipped away with a smirk, she grabbed Ron by the front of his robes and hauled him to his feet, slamming him against the wall with a strength born of adrenaline and sheer fury.

"I ought to murder you right now, Weasley!" she snarled at him. "You lying, treacherous, fucking BASTARD!" This was followed by a blow to the stomach that had Ron doubling up in pain.

"Deanna, wait, I'm sorry, I- agh!" He was cut off by another blow, harder than the last.

"Miss Tyler to you." she seethed at him, before raising her hand to strike again. Fortunately for Ron, Harry and Hermione had arrived by now, horrified by the unfolding violence.

"Deanna, what are you doing?" gasped Hermione.

"Tyler, leave him alone!" said Harry through gritted teeth, grabbing her wrist and trying to pull her off him. Seeming to relent, Deanna stepped back, a cold smile beginning to spread across her face.

Harry let her go, still uncomprehending. "Deanna, what is up with you? What's Ron done to hurt you?"

"Yeah, I mean, if it's a fight you want, Malfoy's over there." said Hermione, indicating Draco who was watching from the sidelines with his usual smirk.

"Malfoy'll keep." said Deanna, her eyes not leaving Ron for an instant. Although he'd picked himself up by now, he was still shaking and looking like he was about to bolt any second. Or at least, he would have done had Marlie and Rianne not been standing either side of him, wands at the ready. "Right now, this one's my priority."

"But why?" asked Harry. "What's he done?"

"Don't you know?" Deanna asked, eyebrows raised in mock surprise. "Did he not come in boasting of his little coup?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. "What little coup?"

Deanna turned back to Ron. "Going to tell them Weasley? Or am I?"

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come out. Instead, he just hung his head, staring at the ground in shame. "Sorry, Harry." were the only words that came out.

"Sorry?" asked Harry, now really confused. "What on earth for?"

"Tell them, Weasley." said Deanna. "Tell them or I will."

Ron gulped, tried to speak, but again, words failed him. He just shook his head, fighting the urge to cry, to prostrate himself before Deanna and beg for mercy.

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione. What was going on?

"Ron? What is it?" Hermione asked, trying to coax the information out of him. "What's happened?"

"I'm sorry." Ron choked. "Really sorry. Hermione, I... I can't..." He turned to Deanna, tears beginning to well up. "I can't... don't make me..."

Deanna just sneered at him before turning to Rianne. "You want to do it?"

Rianne nodded once. "He got Lu expelled. Told Malfoy about her having Parseltongue and a few other things that made it look like she was causing the attacks. He told his father, and hey presto, she's gone."

Harry went very still as he heard this, trying to come to terms with this new revelation. Slowly, he turned to Ron, staring him straight in the eye.

"Is this true?"

Ron couldn't meet his gaze. He just stayed staring at the floor.

"Sorry, Harry." he mumbled. "I'm so sorry."

Harry took a step forward, suddenly looking for all the world like the warrior wizard he'd been predicted to be.

"Is... it... TRUE?" he yelled, moving his face right next to Ron's, the shock beginning to wear off. "Answer me!"

Ron nodded, swallowing back the tears. "Yes. Yes, it is. Harry, I'm sorry, please believe me, I thought she really was the Heir, I thought she'd cast some kind of bewitchment over you, I was wrong, I'm sorry, OW!"

Harry had reached back and delivered a sharp upper cut to Ron's jaw, sending him flying. A moment later and he was on him, raining blows on him left, right and centre.

"LIAR!" he was screaming at him. "You've had it in for everyone Slytherin all year, ever since Ginny got put there. You wanted revenge, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU? You wanted revenge pure and simple and you didn't care whether you were right or wrong or how many people you had to hurt in the process."

"Harry, please, I'm sorry!" Ron pleaded. "Don't hurt me, I didn't think, argh!"

"Too right you didn't think!" thundered Harry, hitting him sharply and repeatedly. "Or you'd have thought twice before stabbing me in the back wouldn't you?"

"Harry!" cried Hermione, alarmed at how violent this was getting. "Don't, you'll hurt him!" She tried to pull him off Ron, without success.

"That's the general idea." snarled Harry as he laid into Ron. Gathering round them, the crowd of watching students began to chant and shout encouragement, as Ron vainly tried to stop Harry punching the living daylights out of him.

The three Slytherins watched the little pantomime from a distance, having retreated once the fight had got underway.

"Well, I suppose it saved us a job." Rianne commented.

"Yeah, I'm not really the violent type." added Marlie. She noticed the looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her. "I'm not!" she protested. "Really!"

"It's true, you know." Deanna mused. "The most effective weapon is one that's so well honed, you don't even have to do anything. It goes to work all by itself."

"Harry, you'll get in trouble, let him go!" Hermione gasped, still trying to break the fight up. She glanced up, suddenly noticing how quiet the room had gone. All around her, students were either staring transfixed with horror, or turning away and slinking off murmuring variations on the words "oh shit". This wasn't a good sign. Turning around, she found herself coming face to face with absolutely the last person she wanted to see.

Professor Snape was standing on the stairs, watching them, eyebrow raised. Not far away, Hermione was vaguely aware of Rianne tugging Deanna's sleeve, and of all three Slytherins turning to see him, as seemingly mesmerised as she was. Slowly, oh so slowly, Snape began to descend.

Those slow, heavy footfalls were enough to penetrate even Harry's singleminded concentration. Feeling the same foreboding that had come over Hermione, he let Ron go and turned. And froze.

Ron, suddenly aware that he was no longer having to fend off blows from all sides, wondered what the problem was. He looked up. And realised that a situation that he'd thought couldn't possibly have got any worse just had. He was doomed. Officially, certainly, irrevocably doomed.

"Well, well, well." Snape's whispered tones shattered the silence. The tension broke, but only in the sense that impending doom was now certain doom. "Potter and Weasley, fighting in the corridor. By rights, I should have you both expelled. However. I'm curious. So tell me, Potter. Why are you assaulting Weasley? The truth now, boy. And make it good."

Harry didn't answer. All he could do was open and close his mouth, looking rather foolish, but too paralysed to do anything more sensible. Beside him, Hermione felt her heart sink. Harry and Ron were both on their last chance as it was, and if neither of them managed to provide Snape with a convincing reply, it looked like Luella wouldn't be the only one with a lot of parental explaining to do.

To everyone's surprise, it was Marlie Lovegood who saved the situation.

"Please sir." she whispered. "It wasn't Harry's fault. Don't blame him."

Snape turned to look at her, a look of icy contempt that seemed to say 'what would you possibly know about this, girl?' It was well known that relations between Marlie and Snape were considerably cooler than those with most other Slytherins.

"Not his fault he was brawling with another student in the corridor and, I might add, getting the upper hand? If you have a rational explanation for that one, Miss Lovegood, I for one would be most interested to hear it."

Rianne came to her friend's assistance. "It's true, sir. It was Deanna who started it, and when Harry found out why, he kinda took over from her."

Snape's scepticism dissolved as his eyes crossed over to Deanna. Now he really was curious.

"Deanna?" he asked sharply. "Miss Tyler, is this true?"

Deanna nodded, not troubling to hide anything. "Absolutely."

"I see." He regarded her rather sternly, but not without an element of alarm. "Would you mind telling me why?"

"It was him who told Malfoy about Lu." Deanna told him. Snape froze, and in that instant, a million and one emotions passed through his eyes. He turned back to the two boys.

"Is this true?" he asked, in that soft voice he always used just when he was at his most dangerous.

Ron didn't say anything. Fear had got the better of him and near catatonia was about the only thing anyone was likely to get out of him now. Harry, however, felt his confidence return. Maybe, just maybe, for once, Snape would actually take his side.

"It's true." he heard himself saying. "The slimy toerag got one of my friends expelled for something she didn't do. I'm not standing for that."

To his surprise, something almost like respect flickered in Snape's eyes.

"I see. An understandable response. However, I must remind you that fighting is strictly forbidden. Five points from Gryffindor. Now, Potter, if you wouldn't mind moving along? You're causing an obstruction."

Harry got up, shaking. Five points? Was that really all that was going to happen? He could scarcely believe it, but Snape didn't look too furious. Not with him anyway, although he wouldn't want to be in Ron's shoes right now. Indicating to Hermione to follow, he slipped away before Snape could change his mind.

Snape cast a look at the throng of students, the one guaranteed to make most of them have a sudden urge to go and do something very important somewhere far, far away.

"Well? Don't the rest of you have places to be?"

They weren't slow in taking the hint. Within minutes the crowd cleared and the room emptied. Hoping to slip away unnoticed in the chaos, Ron picked himself up and tagged after some Hufflepuff third years. Unfortunately, when you're taller than most of your classmates with bright red hair, it's not easy to look inconspicuous.

"Not you, Weasley." The words brought him to a halt like a rope around his neck, jerking him backwards to meet his doom. Hoping he wasn't sweating too much, Ron turned to face Snape's wrath.

"You're not going to hurt him too much, are you?" Marlie asked nervously.

"I?" Snape turned to Marlie, amused. "I'm not going to hurt him at all. Deanna!"

"Yes sir?" Deanna asked eagerly. She'd picked up on the emphasis on the I in that last phrase of Snape's and part of her was hoping that if Ron was going to get hurt, she could inflict some of it.

"You and Weasley come with me. There are things we need to discuss." He turned around and headed for the dungeons. Ron gulped and wished he had the courage to turn and run while he still could. However, Deanna and her friends all had their wands handy and would hex him before he'd gone a yard. No help for it now. Summoning all his resolve, he went off to meet his fate.

Hermione watched from the doorway, fearful of ever seeing Ron again, in one piece anyway. She turned to Harry.

"Do you think he'll be alright?"

Harry shrugged. "Who cares?"

"Harry, he's your friend." said Hermione, a little shocked at his harsh attitude.

"Was, Hermione." Harry corrected. "He *was* my friend."

"Harry..." Hermione tried to persuade him otherwise. Harry cut her off.

"Forget it, Hermione. Friends do not hurt their friends by betraying someone they care about."

"But he might have really thought she was the Heir, and wanted to get her away from you." said Hermione, still wanting to believe Ron had acted honourably.

Harry just laughed. "Mione, is it likely?"

Hermione hung her head. "No, probably not."

"Exactly. Anyway, she is the Heir." he said, lowering his voice.

Hermione's eyes widened. "But... you said she didn't do it."

"That's right."

"So, how can she be the Heir of... oh!" Hermione slapped her forehead. "Of course. She's the Second Heir, isn't she?"

Harry nodded.

"Which means..." Hermione stared at Harry in horror. "Oh god. What's he done?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. Don't know what'll happen now. But this I do know - with Lu gone, we're all in trouble."

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Ron followed Deanna and Snape in silence as they walked through dungeon corridors. Appropriate, really. After all, weren't the dungeons the traditional location for torturing and killing prisoners? No chance of anyone hearing anything down here, and there must be plenty of places for hiding a body. Would he ever see sunlight again? His family? His friends? Unlikely. Harry and Hermione probably didn't care what happened to him now. What with all the attacks recently, it wouldn't be too tricky to convince everyone he'd been the latest victim. He'd not forgotten the look in Snape's eyes, and Deanna would quite happily see him dead right now.

His fears were confirmed when Snape arrived at his office and told them to wait. He went in and re-emerged with a black bag marked with a pentagram, known in the magical world as a symbol of life and wholeness, and thus, healing. A mediwizard's bag. Ron really didn't like the look of this. Snape indicated for them to follow once more and began leading them on a path that appeared to lead into the depths of the dungeons, twisting and turning as it made its way into the depths of the castle. Finally, he arrived outside a particularly intimidating cell and showed them both in.

The torches were lit at a single word from Snape. Deanna took up a position opposite him, a cruel smile on her face.

Snape told Ron to stand against the wall and opened his bag. "*Sensor Injurium*." he murmured, scanning Ron with his wand. Nodding to himself, he drew a small phial of a rather murky looking dark green potion from his bag and presented it to him.

Ron shrank back. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Healing Potion." came the terse reply. "You're still carrying wounds from your fight with Potter. Drink up, boy, it won't kill you."

Ron took it dubiously, but drank it anyway. He pulled a face as the liquid hit his throat. It tasted absolutely foul. However, as he swallowed, the urge to be sick faded as a warm glow spread throughout his entire body, smoothing out aches and pains he hadn't known he had, healing wounds the adrenaline had stopped him noticing. Within seconds he felt on top of the world.

"Thank you." he whispered, handing back the phial. Snape just shrugged.

"I may not like you, but I'm not likely to send a wounded man into combat. Now. To business." He turned to Ron with a sharklike smile that mirrored Deanna's so closely it was uncanny. "Given that Luella was expelled by the governors exactly in line with procedure, there is no official punishment I can deal out for your actions. However, unless this whole business is laid to rest, there will be repercussions. Serious repercussions. Boy, are you familiar with the concept of wergild?"

Somehow, Ron didn't think it was money that turned into a wolf every full moon. "Er... no."

"Then I shall explain. Under ancient law that Slytherin House still adheres to even now, if someone wrongs somebody, the victim or their kin are entitled to demand compensation. This is known as wergild, normally paid in the form of money or goods, the exact amount depending on the harm done."

"But I don't have any money." Ron whispered.

"I don't want your money." Deanna hissed. Snape merely sighed.

"You see my problem, Weasley. Deanna has no need of any more money, and doesn't want it anyway. Besides, you have none to give. However, there are... other ways of making amends."

"Such as?" Ron asked, not liking the way this was going.

"Well, if no wergild was forthcoming, tradition usually was to declare either a bloodfeud between the two families concerned, or a vendetta between the two individuals. However, Deanna's family are already involved with a bloodfeud with the Malfoys, and I'm sure she won't want to have two on her hands."

"Which just leaves..." Ron really didn't want to hear the answer to this.

"A tradition known as indenturing, by which the perpetrator signed themselves over to their victim as a slave for a fixed term, during which they belonged to the victim entirely, body and soul, although the victim could not do anything more damaging than the original crime. Sometimes this was genuine slavery over a period of years, after which they returned home. At other times, it was for only a period of hours or less during which the victim exacted what retribution they wished, again, not exceeding the original damage."

It began to dawn on Ron just what Snape was getting at. "You're going to make me Deanna's slave?"

"For a time."

"I don't want a slave, I want blood!" Deanna snarled. "I want to finish what I started in the Hall."

"And so you shall, my dear." purred Snape. "What I propose is this. For a short period of, say, ten minutes, I shall leave you two alone in here. During that time, Deanna is permitted to do whatever she wishes to you in revenge. After that, I shall return, carry out whatever healing is necessary and send you both on your way, grievance dealt with. Is this acceptable?"

Deanna nodded, smiling once more. "I like it. When do I start?"

"Patience, dear child." Snape soothed her. "There are certain formalities. There are rules after all. Well, Weasley? Do you agree to this?"

"What happens if I don't?" Ron whispered, his throat dry.

"In that case, I send you both away now. But Deanna's anger will be left festering, and it will slowly change into hate and loathing. You'll have to deal with knowing she hates and despises you, and that one day, that will come home to roost, in a time, place and manner of her choosing. Whereas if you choose this way, you have a few minutes of pain, but her anger will be sated. Of course, she'll still despise you, but at least you'll be able to sleep at night and won't have to worry about what she might be planning."

Ron closed his eyes, remembering Deanna's murderous rage of earlier. She was Slytherin too, gods only knew what she might plan. Snape had a point, maybe it was best to get it over with now.

"Alright." he whispered. "I submit."

"Very good, Weasley." said Snape in approval. "You do have some sense after all. Now the formalities. Your wands please." He held out his hand.

"Oh, don't I get to use magic?" Deanna pouted.

"I think physical violence is quite enough, besides it has a certain satisfying primacy about it that magic does not. Anyway, magic can be detected."

"Suppose." Deanna shrugged and handed her wand over. Snape turned to Ron.

"Well?"

Ron looked at his wand. Spellotaped together, still sputtering the odd spark, unicorn hair poking out of the end, splinters dropping out of the middle where it had nearly broken in two. He was loath to hand it over, but on the other hand it would probably do him more harm than good in close quarters. Despite himself, he handed it over.

Snape took it with a sneer. "Really Weasley, is this the best you can manage? Maybe we've located the source of your insecurities. Wand envy is a terrible thing, boy."

Without waiting for a reply, he moved on to the formal declarations. "Do you, Ronald Arthur Weasley, admit that by passing certain information that should have been kept quiet to a sworn enemy, you have intentionally caused the wrongful expulsion of one Luella Angelica Martin?"

"Yes, but..." Ron started. Snape cut him off.

"That will do. Deanna Melissa Tyler, do you agree to stand as champion on Luella Angelica Martin's behalf, as her sworn sister-in-spirit and ally?"

"I do."

"Good, good. And do you, Ronald Arthur Weasley, agree to submit yourself to Deanna Melissa Tyler for the next ten minutes for purposes of exacting blood instead of wergild?"

Ron really didn't like the sound of this at all. "Blood? That wasn't in the deal!"

Snape gave an exasperated sigh. "It's metaphorical, boy, although if you agree to allow Deanna to physically attack you, you must expect some blood loss at some point. Do you agree?"

"I... well..." Ron hesitated. Now it came to it, he really didn't want to do this. But on the other hand, there was the thought of Deanna haunting him for years to come, sharpening a sword and looking for revenge. "OK. I'll do it."

"Thank you. Deanna Melissa Tyler, as Luella Angelica Martin is not dead, do you accept that you have only the right to hurt, not to maim or kill?"

Deanna sighed. "Yes, alright." she said, somewhat reluctantly.

"Excellent. Furthermore, as Luella Angelica Martin is healthy in body if not spirit, do you accept that you may not cause any permanent damage, or any damage that may not be healed by a mediwizard's skill?"

"Yes, yes." sighed Deanna, getting rather impatient. "Can we get on with it, please?"

"In a moment. Now." Snape waved his wand and an hourglass appeared, hovering in mid air. "When the sand starts flowing, you may begin. When it stops, you must stop. Weasley, you are committed to remaining for the full time. I remind you of your agreement to submit, and that you may not retaliate or raise a hand in your defence. Deanna, if you wish to stop before the time is up, you may do so. I remind you of your vow to cause no permanent damage." He reached out and tapped the hourglass. The sand started to flow. "I shall be outside. Begin." With that, he slipped out of the door, the lock clicking shut behind him.

Deanna turned to Ron, gloating. "Well now, Weasley. Shall we begin?"

He never got the chance to answer. She was on him straight away, hands round his throat, forcing him back against the wall.

"No permanent damage, no killing or maiming, nothing that can't be healed." she sneered at him, tightening her grip. "We'll see about that."

Ron tried to answer, but no words came out, just a horrible choking sound. He felt the room starting to spin as it went black at the edges. If she went on like this, he'd lose consciousness. He began to wonder if Deanna really was strong enough to throttle him.

He never did find out. Just as the room went completely black, she let him go. He fell to the ground, nursing his windpipe. She took the opportunity to give him a good kick to the jaw, sending him sprawling.

"You think that Lu'll ever heal? Do you?" she was snarling at him as she moved in. "Unless she somehow manages to clear her name and gets reinstated, the damage will be permanent. She'll always have the fear of getting found out, the fear that the dark witch tag will remain, that she doesn't deserve her power. You bastard, Weasley!" She hit him again.

"Sorry..." Ron whispered. "I'm sorry."

"You will be." Deanna responded as she struck him once more. "Oh, you will be." She dragged him to his feet, only to knee him in the groin, punch him in the stomach and while he was doubled up from the pain, elbowed him in the back, forcing him to his knees.

"Let's hear it Ron." Deanna laughed. "Let's hear it then. You're sorry, aren't you?"

"Yes." gasped Ron.

"You were wrong to even think about getting rid of Lu."

"Yes. Deanna, please..." he begged.

"Shut it." she snapped, dealing him a backhander to the face. One of her gothic rings caught his cheek, slashing it open to leave a trail of blood. "You talk when I ask you something. Other than that, you keep your mouth shut. Got that?"

Ron nodded.

"Good. Now. You were very wrong to go to Malfoy. Very, very wrong. Isn't that right?"

"Yes." Ron whispered, feeling tears come to his eyes.

"And what does that make you, Weasley?"

Ron paused. There were many answers, but he knew better than to think any of them would appease her. Nevertheless, he could but try.

"A lying, traitorous bastard?" he volunteered.

"Correct, Weasel. One hundred per cent accurate." On the last word, she lifted her leg and swung her foot round to connect with the side of his face. He fell to the floor, the wind knocked out of him. Not to mention the fact that a Doc Marten boot in the face is not a particularly pleasant experience. One of the eyelets in the side had given him another cut to match the first, and he could tell he'd lost a couple of layers of skin there.

She was on him again almost immediately, grabbing his arm and pinning it behind his back. He screamed in pain as she wrenched it almost out of the socket, forcing his elbow into a position nature had never intended.

With her other hand, she grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head back.

"I'm not going to kill you, Weasley." she whispered. "I'm just going to make you wish I was!" She began repeatedly slamming his head into the unforgiving stone floor. In vain, Ron tried to turn his head, but Deanna was having none of it. He went nose first into the paving slabs, and felt it break on impact, drenching him in blood.

Deanna didn't let a little detail like that bother her. She kept on slamming his head on to the floor until he was nearly unconscious, before letting go and sliding off him, using his pinioned right arm to flip him over. Ron cried out as he felt his shoulder really dislocate this time. With the one eye that hadn't swollen up so badly he couldn't see out of it, he looked up at the almost unrecognisable demented fury that was Deanna Tyler, trying to plead for mercy.

He didn't get it. She was on her feet now, kicking him in the abdomen for all she was worth. At first, the kicks came fast and furious, but after a bit, Ron was aware that they were slowing down. Was she tiring finally, or was he just imagining it? Maybe the pain and increasing lightheadedness were causing him to lose all sense of time.

But no. Deanna really was slowing down. With a couple of desultory kicks to finish off, she finally came to a halt and stood back, breathing heavily and shaking.

"No fun if they don't fight back." he heard her say quietly. "Besides, you're hardly worth the bother." He heard her turn and walk out, hammering the door and calling to

Snape to let her out. The door clicked open and he heard Snape saying with surprise "You're finished early, child. Not even five minutes gone yet."

Ron rolled over, wincing as his ribs made contact with the floor and tried to focus on the sandtimer. To his surprise, it was only just under half full.

"I just didn't see the point in continuing." he heard Deanna answer. "It won't bring Lu back, and there's no satisfaction if he's going along with it. It's like kicking a puppy."

Snape nodded, smiling in satisfaction. "Lesson learned well, child. Revenge has its limitations. Do you still want him hung, drawn and quartered?"

Deanna looked back at him. "Not really. Couldn't care less any more, to be honest."

Snape's smile broadened. "It worked then. Go on, child, be off with you. Get yourself cleaned up. I'll tie things up here."

"OK then." Deanna responded, suddenly sounding completely exhausted. "See you, sir." She left the room.

Snape bade her farewell before approaching Ron, bag in hand.

"Well now, let's see what Caitlin Tyler's child has done to you then." He shook his head as he looked at Ron's face. "She didn't pull her punches, did she?" He pulled out his wand and cast the Sensor Injurium spell again. "Oh dear. One black eye, two rather nasty cuts, much superficial skin damage, a broken nose, broken jaw, dislocated jaw too, rather a lot of blood loss, concussion and a hairline fracture in the skull. And that's just the head." He allowed the wand to travel lower. "Hmm. Cracked ribs, bruising, dislocated shoulder, ligament damage to the elbow, and I think you have a ruptured spleen there too. Interesting, but I think I can deal with this."

Reaching for his wand again, he began to heal the surface damage first, before rummaging around in his bag for another potion.

"Extra Strength Healing Potion. Sit up, boy." With a gesture that was surprisingly tender, he lifted Ron into a sitting position, before helping him swallow the contents of the phial.

This potion tasted even worse than the other one had. Ron shuddered, pulled a face and choked repeatedly, desperately wanting to vomit the foul thing up. However, it stayed down. Then the warm feeling in his stomach began, except this time it swiftly turned into a roaring furnace that seemed to set his very blood on fire, coursing throughout his body, seeming to set it alight.

"It's burning, it's burning me!" Ron howled.

"Of course it's burning you, boy, it's the Extra Strength version." Snape snapped at him. "Hold still and take it, it doesn't last long."

Ron moaned and curled up, trying to stop the pain. Slowly, he felt the fire burn itself out, as his temperature dropped to normal, leaving him covered in sweat and trembling. However, he no longer felt lightheaded and the pain was gone. His shoulder was just fine, if a little stiff, the aches and pains in his muscles were gone, his stomach no longer hurt, and his face felt as if nothing had ever happened to it. Tentatively, he rubbed his nose and jaw. They were still covered in blood, but otherwise were fine.

"Thank you." he whispered.

Snape shrugged. "I could hardly send you back to class in that state." He conjured up a towel, flannel and a bowl of hot water. "Clean yourself up, then I've got a few other potions for you."

Ron did as he was told, sponging the blood off his face and hands, noticing his reflection in the water and being relieved to see that he looked normal again. After drying himself off, he turned back to Snape who had some more potions ready.

"This one will replace the nutrients lost by all the bleeding. This will encourage the production of more red blood cells. This is not a potion but a salve for any remaining muscle aches. And now..." He brandished his wand again and a black Hogwarts cloak appeared in his hand. Ron took it and realised with a start that it was his own.

"My cloak!" he gasped. Snape tutted irritably.

"I'm hardly likely to teleport someone else's, am I?" he snapped. "Put it on, you need to keep warm. What lesson do you have next?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts." Ron replied with a grimace.

"I see. Very well, I will send your apologies to Professor Lockhart. In the mean time, you will go back to your common room, have a hot bath, get changed into some clean clothes, and spend the afternoon resting and staying warm. You will have an uncomfortable afternoon, but you will be fine by dinnertime. Drink your potions, boy, I need the phials back."

Ron did as he was told, grimacing each time, although they weren't that bad, not really. Snape took the little bottles back, before reaching into his robes.

"I almost forgot. Your wand." He held it out with a sneer. Ron took it off him, but paused before he got up to leave.

"Sir, why'd you do all this?" he blurted out. "Why not just give me a detention like normal."

Snape hesitated before turning to him. "You heard Deanna as she left?"

"Yes."

"You heard her she say no longer feels angry at you?"

"Yes." said Ron, still a little wary.

"You see my point." Snape gestured. "Better some blood shed now than a bloodfeud later, as we Slytherins like to say. I can heal most injuries, but I can't stop a war. This way, Deanna's got it all out of her system, and you're properly chastened. A good outcome all round." His expression hardened. "Now get out of my sight."

Ron didn't wait to be told twice. Pausing only to pick up his bag, he ran out of the dungeon as fast he could go, back to the common room and a semblance of normality.

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Chapter Twenty Three Aftermath and Redemption

Luella, meanwhile, wasn't having much more fun than Ron had been. She'd spent most of the eight hour journey bored out of her skull, playing with Sooty, reading, or just staring out of the window, wondering what on earth the future held, and what everyone was doing at Hogwarts without her. Of course, had she known that her friends had spent most of the time beating Ron up and walking out on Lockhart, she'd have been torn between being touched that they'd done all that just for her sake, and horrified at the level of violence. But as it was, she was unaware of all that and likely to remain so. Because as the train pulled into King's Cross, she had more pressing problems on her hands.

Such as the fact that it was cold, she was hungry, had no money other than a few Galleons, the sun had set long ago, and it had just begun to really hit home that she wouldn't be back at Hogwarts again for some time and her friends were far, far away. That, and her magic was gone. Well, not gone exactly. But out of reach. Suppressing a lump in her throat, she pulled on her cloak and surveyed her trunk, wondering just how she was supposed to get this thing off the train on her own.

She tried pulling it. It moved a little. But not very far, and already her muscles were aching. Swearing under her breath, she tried again. No better. This was no use. She'd never get the thing off the train at this rate, never mind home. And if she couldn't even get her stuff home, how the hell was she going to cope with the rest of her life? Sinking into a chair, she began to cry.

And stopped as she heard a woman's voice whisper the words "*Wingardium Leviosa!*", saw magic flash out, and her trunk rise a foot in the air. Gasping in amazement, she turned to see a familiar figure in the doorway, blue robes glimmering in the half-light.

"Caitlin!" she cried, running to her and flinging her arms around the older witch in a way she'd not done with her own mother for a very long time. Caitlin smiled and took Luella in her arms.

"Hello, love. Thought I'd better come on board and find you - I was wondering if you might need help."

Luella nodded. "Thanks." she whispered. "Oh, Caitlin, what am I going to do?"

"First things first." Caitlin told her. "You're coming back to my place, you're going to settle in, we're going to get something to eat, and hopefully then, Severus'll arrive and we can decide what we're going to do next."

Luella dried her eyes. "OK." she whispered. "How do we get there?"

"There's a Ministry car waiting outside. I've requisitioned it on classified DDAE business." Caitlin grinned.

"Is that allowed?" asked Luella in surprise.

"Probably not, but no one else wants it and when you've got my security clearance level, no one argues." Caitlin shrugged. "Come on, let's get out of here." Taking Luella by the hand, she led her out.

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The journey home didn't take long. The Ministry car slid through what remained of the evening rush as if the traffic didn't exist, and by eight o'clock, just one hour after leaving King's Cross, they were back at the Tylers.

Back, but not home and dry just yet, it seemed. Luella couldn't help noticing that there was a light on in the small house.

"Caitlin," she began, "did you leave the lights turned on?"

"No," said Caitlin, already producing her wand. "I didn't. Wait here, and *don't* leave the car until I come back for you." She turned to the driver. "If I don't return, or something happens, take Luella to DDAE HQ and contact Melissa Lovegood immediately. The light in the front room flashing three times is an all's well signal. Blue flares out of the chimney is a distress signal. I shall be back as soon as I can." With that she left the car, cast a Glamour about herself and slipped into the house.

First indications were good. No voices, so the intruder was either alone or working with a deaf-mute. She also noted that it was the kitchen light that had been turned on. And coming from the open door, the intoxicating scent of honey mixed with herbs and fried chicken. Nice. Very nice. Caitlin realised with a groan that she'd not eaten for seven hours. Stop it, Tyler, she scolded herself. Don't let your stomach get the better of you now. Wand at the ready, she edged into the room.

It was the scent of food that saved the intruder's life. Had Caitlin not been so tempted, he'd have been dead or at least beyond caring within moments. As it was, Caitlin decided to ask questions first for once.

He was bending down, going through her cupboards, partially obscured by the kitchen table. Nevertheless, the black-robed figure was visible enough for Caitlin to get a good shot in. Raising her wand, she stepped forward.

"Hold it right there, stranger. DDAE. Make one false move and we won't need to bother with Azkaban."

The intruder stopped what he was doing and looked up, very slowly. Caitlin put the wand down immediately.

"Severus?" she gasped. "Do you mind telling me just what you think you're doing?"

Severus got to his feet, apparently unbothered, although there was an edge of anxiety in his eyes. However, his voice didn't show it.

"Cooking," he replied. "I thought you and Luella could do with a good meal. Don't act so surprised, I did tell you I'd be coming round."

"It's generally considered common courtesy to wait to be admitted when visiting another's house." Caitlin shot back at him, furious at his invasion of privacy, but more furious still that she'd been so keyed up over nothing. Only now did she realise how fast her heart was beating and how much she was shaking. However, curiosity got the better of her and she didn't remain angry for long. "How did you get in anyway?"

"Placed my left palm on the sign and recited my maternal lineage." Severus responded. "Ancient Tal-y-Rhys magic, don't you know. Any clan member can use it to gain an audience with the Lady of Tal-y-Rhys."

Caitlin winced to hear the clan-mother's title spoken out loud. It might well be hers now, but that didn't mean it sat comfortably on her shoulders. "Don't call me that!" she whispered. "It's my mother's title, not mine."

"Your mother's dead, Caitlin." Severus told her coldly. "You're the Lady now."

"Lady?" laughed Caitlin bitterly. "Of what?" She sank into a chair, her mother's memory still able to hurt her, despite the twelve year distance. Time meant nothing with wounds that deep. And more than Medea Tyler had died that night - most of the Tal-y-Rhys heritage had been wiped out too. "A house that's in ruins and a clan that can be numbered on the fingers of one hand! Deanna, Luella, Arabella Figg, Penelope Clearwater, and you. Some inheritance."

"Nevertheless, it's enough." Severus said as he approached. Although he still looked stern, there was an element of tenderness in his manner which left her touched. It was more than she'd expected. "You are still head of the family, I'm still a loyal Son of the Tal-y-Rhys, and Luella needs us both." He hesitated for the briefest of instants before taking her hand and squeezing it. "Consider me at your service."

Caitlin smiled and returned the gesture. "Thank you," she whispered. Although she was under no illusions that any other reason than duty and care for Luella brought him here, she was glad of the support. Maybe there was hope yet. And she couldn't deny she was pleased to see him again. She glanced at the pans on the oven.

"So what's for dinner?"

"Chicken coated in honey and mustard sauce. With mashed potatoes and assorted vegetables. To your taste?"

"Sounds wonderful." Caitlin breathed. "You know, you didn't have to go to all this trouble, I could have fed Luella."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think the poor girl's suffered enough?" He looked up. "Talking of Luella, where is she? You did remember to collect her, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, she's in the car."

"Good." Severus returned to his cooking. "Better go and get her then. This evening's going to be long enough as it is."

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Luella followed Caitlin inside, profoundly relieved that it was only Severus who'd invaded the Tyler house. Marauding dark mages were the last thing she needed right now.

He greeted her in a surprisingly gentle manner, gentle for him anyway, producing a cup of hot chocolate that seemed almost made to order.

"Four spoonfuls of cocoa, two-thirds boiling water, one third cold, stir it well, then cream and grated chocolate to top it with." he told her as he offered her the steaming mug, a Pigeon Street one belonging to Deanna that she claimed never to use any more, although Luella suspected otherwise. "A secret family recipe, known to only a few. Most people make the mistake of filling it up with boiling water, which destroys the taste and renders it undrinkable. What do you think?"

"Lovely!" whispered Luella. "Smells really chocolatey too."

"Good, that's how it should be." Severus smiled. "I find it has a comforting effect second to none. Better than any potion, don't you agree Caitlin? Caitlin?"

Caitlin didn't answer. She was staring at Luella's hot chocolate, mesmerised.

"Chocolate..." she hissed, almost salivating with desire.

"Oh good grief." sighed Severus. "Alright Caitlin, do you want some as well?"

She nodded.

"Alright then." Before long, another mug, a Che Guevara one this time that definitely didn't belong to Deanna, was being presented to the near-catatonic Caitlin, who grasped it with both hands, savouring it with delight.

"So easily pleased." Severus commented. "Whoever said women are complex and mysterious creatures? Just give them lots of chocolate, red wine, massages and

compliments, and agree with everything they say. It's simple. I can't believe how many men have problems with it."

"They do?" Luella asked, curious.

"Oh yes." Severus nodded. "So many men, usually Gryffindors, I might add, seem to have immense problems understanding women and their needs. They seem to think they're some kind of separate species. Although, looking at some of these men, maybe they have a point. However, I digress. Caitlin, how about dinner?"

"Yes please." whispered Caitlin, her chocolate cravings now perfectly satisfied.

"Very well then. Dinner is served."

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The meal proved to be as special as the drinks. Luella didn't know how he'd done it, but every drop of flavour, every nuance of texture had been expertly blended and brought out to create a taste sensation. Clearly all that Potions expertise had other beneficial side-effects. Luella wished he'd come and visit every night for that reason alone. She could get used to eating like this.

They didn't talk much. When the food was that good, you didn't, and besides, Luella was used to eating with Deanna, who regarded meals as a sacrosanct time not to be interrupted by anything so petty as conversation. So it was that nothing more was said until after they'd all finished.

Caitlin was first to speak.

"Severus," she sighed, "forget our past differences. Forget everything that's ever happened between us. I'll marry you now if you promise to cook like that every evening."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Is it really that easy? Caitlin, you are such a slut sometimes."

"I may be." Caitlin purred, shaking her hair back. "But at least I'm a slut with *standards*."

He shook his head. "She's terrible. Luella, I'm beginning to wonder if it's safe to leave you alone with this brazen hussy. Are you sure you won't be corrupted?"

Luella just smiled. "She's no worse than Marls."

Caitlin dissolved into giggles. "Mel's going to love that! Her daughter's turned out worse than me."

"Don't I know it." muttered Severus. "Every lesson I spend with my nerves on edge, wondering what's she's going to get wrong this week. Or worse, what her and

Weasley are planning. It's like dealing with a Slytherin version of the worst aspects of Neville Longbottom and Fred Weasley."

"Now, now, Severus, it can't be that bad." Caitlin soothed him. "She's quite bright after all, and she's not *always* in trouble, is she?"

"No, but only because she manages to cover her tracks so well." said Severus darkly. "Who knows what she gets up to that no one's found out about yet?"

At this Luella immediately looked away, gazing innocently at the ceiling. Now was probably not the time to draw attention to herself. She noticed Severus watching her rather shrewdly, but didn't react.

Seeing that Luella was giving nothing away, Severus changed the subject. "Anyway, Miss Lovegood is, fortunately, far, far away right now. Can we get back to the matter in hand? Namely, Luella here."

Caitlin's mirth disappeared. "Right. Yes. Luella." There was an awkward silence. "So, er, what do you suggest?"

Severus drew his wand and banished the dishes to the sink. "I don't know, I was hoping you'd have thought of something."

"Oh gods, Severus." sighed Caitlin. "I've had a very trying day, as have we all, and I'm wiped out. How about we just all chill for a bit and see what happens? Luella?"

"Sounds good to me." Luella yawned, realising how tired she was. "How about we go to the living room?"

She regretted it as soon as she'd said it. Both Caitlin and Severus froze, the tension between them, so easily hidden thus far, now alive and unconcealable.

"I'd much rather stay here, the living room's a tip..." Caitlin began, but was cut off by Severus saying "Alright then, if that's what you want, I don't mind."

"We don't have to, I'm quite happy right here." said Caitlin, fidgeting uncharacteristically anxiously.

"I've got no problem with the living room." Severus announced, sounding rather more harsh than the occasion warranted. "If that's what Luella wants, that's what we'll do."

"Severus, are you sure...?" Caitlin asked, concerned.

"I'm sure." he cut her off.

Luella looked from one to the other, beginning to panic. Damn it, that must have been where their little fight happened. No wonder Caitlin didn't want Severus to go there. And no wonder Severus was even now defiantly insisting on it. She began to wish she'd kept her mouth shut.

She looked at Caitlin, hoping for support. No chance - Caitlin looked as fearful as she did. She turned to Severus, who seemed set on revisiting the scene. Maybe he wanted to exorcise a few demons. Well, why not? Might do him good.

She got to her feet. "Shall we make a move then? I don't know about you, but I really fancy a comfy seat."

Caitlin appeared resigned to fate as she got to her feet. "Alright then. Let's go."

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Luella followed Caitlin down the hallway with mounting trepidation. This could go any number of ways, and most of them were not pleasant. She was aware of Severus behind her, his breathing coming in ever faster intervals and his footsteps ever so slightly slowing down. Despite his outward firmness, he was worried.

Caitlin hesitated at the doorway. Seemed she needed a few seconds to compose herself too. This really wasn't a good sign, the adults being as emotionally vulnerable as she was. Fortunately, Aurors didn't get ahead by letting fear control them, and Caitlin stepped easily into the room, pausing only to light the fire before sliding gracefully onto the sofa, pulling off her boots and putting her feet up on the coffee table.

Luella felt some of her worries subside. Caitlin would be OK, anyway. But would he?

She watched Severus approach the door in his turn, trembling, and pale even by his standards. He closed his eyes, holding the doorjamb for support, still breathing in that awful, laboured way.

Concerned, Luella approached. He looked truly awful, like he was going to faint. Was he going to make it as far as one of the chairs? Why are men so stubborn, she thought to herself as she turned on the Glamoury.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Sir?"

"What?" he snarled, clearly struggling with whatever he was feeling.

"Look at me."

Something in her voice made him obey. He opened his eyes and looked at her. And in that moment of vulnerability, fell into the usual Glamoury trance, his normal resistance down.

"You're safe." she said, ever so softly. "No harm will come to you here. Morgan's Heir has you under her protection. Have no fear - the Lady will not strike tonight."

She released him and watched as he blinked and looked at her, a piercing look that caused her to turn away, now rather embarrassed at herself. However, he didn't seem angry.

"You never cease to amaze me, young Redeemer." Turning back to the doorway, still uneasy, but not nearly as anxious as he had been, he steeled himself and walked in, settling into the chair nearest the door. Once sitting down, he seemed to relax, although Luella noticed he studiously avoided looking at the part of the room near the fire, nor did he look directly at Caitlin. Still, he was much improved, and Luella, relieved, settled down next to Caitlin, who was looking at the ground with a mixture of sadness and resignation.

"It will take more than Glamour to heal wounds so deep." Caitlin said quietly, so quietly Luella could barely hear her. "But nevertheless, you did well." A pause. "Thank you."

Luella wasn't sure how to react to that. Part of her felt like snapping back that if Caitlin hadn't lost it in the first place, she wouldn't have needed to do anything. And yet, the sadness in Caitlin's whole demeanour held her back. Caitlin too had been wounded. Punishing her wouldn't solve anything.

"Erm... cheers." Luella shifted uncomfortably. "So now what?"

"Now we start planning your future." came the reply from Severus. "We'll need to continue your lessons here. Caitlin, is this place safe from prying eyes? In particular, Ministry eyes."

"Of course it is." said Caitlin. "What Tal-y-Rhys magic can't conceal, a word from the DDAE can. Trust me, no one ever pries here."

"Good. So when Luella starts practising charms and transfiguration, plus whatever obscure Dark Arts and anti-Dark Arts you plan to teach her, it won't set off every alarm at the Improper Use of Magic Office."

"Hardly." smiled Caitlin thinly.

"I'm going to be learning Dark Arts?" Luella whispered, her mind boggling.

"Not exactly." Caitlin told her. "Not the extreme stuff anyway. But you can certainly expect to be learning things that aren't on the Hogwarts curriculum."

"With Lockhart teaching, that doesn't narrow it down a lot." Severus remarked. "You'll be spending the first two months catching up on everything you would have done this year had you had a competent teacher."

Both Luella and Caitlin laughed at this. Until a thought struck Luella.

"But... I don't have a wand any more." she began. "How will I be able to practice magic?"

"A very good point." said Severus. "Caitlin, where can we get a wand with no questions asked? Is there a strong black market in wands for banished mages?"

"Not here, although America's got a wand shop on every corner." Caitlin sniffed. "Honestly, bloody Yanks and their fanatical insistence on no wand control restrictions. If they actually had anything resembling a state over there, they'd have the right to bear a wand right up there with the free speech. Do you realise they've got this National Wand Association encouraging kids as young as three to use wands?"

"I can believe it." Severus replied. "It's one mixed-up country and no mistake. They let you have a wand as soon as you're old enough to hold one, and yet don't let you drink until you're halfway to middle-age because they don't think the young are responsible enough to handle it." He shrugged. "A very strange people, Americans. Very outspoken, forthright and passionate... about all the wrong things."

"But can they get me a wand?" asked Luella, ignoring the less-than-flattering commentary.

"Probably." replied Caitlin. "But that may not be necessary."

Both Severus and Luella sat bolt upright at this, Severus forgetting that he was meant to be traumatised and staring right at her.

"Not necessary?" he demanded, his gaze hardening. "Why on earth not? Caitlin, what have you got up your sleeve now?"

Caitlin didn't answer straight away. A strange, far away look entered her eyes. When she did speak, it was in a very slow, deliberate voice.

"Not up my sleeve. But in this house, there is more than one Tyler wand."

"What, another one?" Luella asked, bewildered. "Whose?"

Caitlin got to her feet, and walked slowly towards the fireplace, her hands beginning to shake. Nevertheless, she seemed strangely composed.

"Twelve years ago, this came into my possession, along with all the other family heirlooms." she whispered. "Of them all, this was the one I least wished to have, and by all rights, the one I shouldn't have. And yet I held on to it. All this time, I've held on to it. All because the damned thing wouldn't break when it was meant to..." Her composure snapped and she let out a sob, her voice breaking. Luella looked away, guilty at making Caitlin go through what was obviously painful for her. And yet, she was desperately curious to know whose wand it was, and why Caitlin hadn't wanted to take it into her possession.

Severus also seemed to be wrestling with himself. He was watching Caitlin in pain, clutching the arms of his chair, clearly unable to bear seeing her like that, and yet unwilling to go to her, unwilling to go any nearer the fireplace than he had to. Tearing his eyes away, he came face to face with Luella's own anguished gaze.

"Why is she so upset?" Luella whispered. "Whose wand was it?"

"One who shouldn't have died." Severus said softly. "At least, if it's who I think it is." He hesitated. "Luella, help me, I hate seeing her cry..."

Luella nodded, guessing what he needed from her. Taking a deep breath, she switched on the Glamoury again. "Go to her." she whispered. "I will protect you."

It worked. Severus slipped into trance, before snapping decisively out of it, this time looking far more determined. Steeling himself, he got to his feet and strode over to her, wincing with every step but not turning back. Standing behind her, he gripped her shoulders with his fingertips, seemingly afraid to touch her too closely, but wanting to comfort her regardless.

"Ssh, don't cry." he whispered to her. "It's alright, we're both here, Luella and I. You'll be fine."

"It shouldn't be here." Caitlin wept, rubbing her eyes. "I should have buried it with her, like I did with Lil's and James's, should have snapped it in two like we're meant to, so she could have it in the underworld. It's one of the most important duties the next of kin can perform, and I couldn't do it. Damn thing refused to break..." She began to weep again. Severus said nothing, although he gripped her shoulders harder and moved that bit closer. Caitlin reached for his hand and squeezed it in a simple gesture of thanks. The two of them remained like that for a while, before Caitlin pulled herself together, dried her eyes and turned around. Severus let her go and stepped back. Caitlin smiled at him, with a little flash of Glamoury of her own.

"Thanks." she whispered, before pulling another Glamour over herself, one that made her look as if she'd not cried at all. She turned to Luella. "Lu, honey, come here. It shouldn't be here, but it is, and these things happen for a reason. Wands aren't that difficult to break, as you yourself well know, and maybe this one had a reason for not breaking. Whatever, it's here, and it seems rather appropriate that you have it. Come." She beckoned Luella over. Luella approached the fireplace, her heart racing. A new wand, and not just any wand, but a Tal-y-Rhys heirloom? She could scarcely believe it. And yet, Caitlin was even now running her wand along the mantelpiece, reaching for a certain panel, pressing the top left corner and reaching into the gap that had just opened up. Luella watched in amazement as Caitlin produced a long, thin wooden box, inlaid with ivory, and covered with bizarre drawings of elephants, giraffes, lions, and other African animals.

Caitlin cradled it, smiling tenderly. "My mother loved Africa. She spent five years travelling around it after she left Hogwarts. Learnt all sorts of magic out there from some of the best witchdoctors around. Egyptian, Zulu, Afrikaan, Bantu, Arab, every ethnic group in Africa, you could guarantee she'd know some of their secrets. You should have seen Tal-y-Rhys Manor, kid, it was full of all the souvenirs she'd picked up on her travels. Most other kids had toy rabbits and bears in their rooms. I ended up with a real stuffed crocodile, and a real stuffed gorilla, and a real stuffed lion, all miniaturised. Still, I wouldn't have changed anything for the world." She looked up at Luella. "As you may have guessed by now, this is my mother's wand. She died in 1981, murdered by Voldemort while trying to work on some kind of magic that would have defeated him. I don't know if she completed the spell - my intuition tells me not, or there'd be no Voldemort left. African magic does not pull its punches. However, I

think it may have done enough even half-finished. And that magic was the last act this wand performed." She lifted the lid, no longer weeping, now the proud Tal-y-Rhys showing off her mother's skills. "Look, Luella. No Ollivander effort, this! Her original wand was lost while exploring an ancient jungle temple - I think she dropped it while doing a commando roll under this slab of rock that was threatening to block her escape route. So she made herself another one using the materials to hand. Nine inches long, ebony, contains lion sinew. I think she killed the lion herself."

"Good gods, Caitlin, you never told me your mother was the Slytherin James Bond." commented Severus dryly.

"She was not the Slytherin James Bond." Caitlin responded, irritated at the interruption of her monologue. "I am. She was Indiana Jones. Now, if we can get back to the subject in hand..." She returned her attention to a fascinated Luella. "The custom is that when a mage dies, their wand is snapped in two and buried with them. I did that for Harry's parents, but when I came to do the same for mine, it refused to break. I don't know what my mother did to it, but she'd obviously had problems with wands breaking when they shouldn't."

Severus tutted in mock sympathy. "Dear oh dear. Wands aren't what they used to be, are they? Honestly, all she did was wrestle live crocodiles, avoid booby traps in ancient temples, get into fights with tribesfolk whose customs she'd broken or whose idols she'd nicked, end up duelling witchdoctors, and hunt down ferocious beasts with nothing but her bare hands. Who'd have thought a wand couldn't handle a few simple jobs like that?"

"Severus, shut up." Caitlin snapped at him. "As I was saying," here she shot him a look that could have killed, "she'd made this wand to last, and nothing I could do was going to break it. So I kept it and buried her without it, hoping that someone who'd faced the wilds of Africa on her own could deal with whatever the underworld had to offer. And now I'm giving it to you. Here. Take it. It's yours now."

She held the box towards Luella, unwrapping the folds of silk that concealed its contents. Luella peered in, eager to get a glimpse of this wand.

It was jet black, gleaming in the firelight, sanded down to an impossible smoothness which meant it hardly looked wooden at all, but some sleek, inhuman thing with a mind of its own. Indeed, the strongest impression that Luella got from it was a sense that there was some kind of primitive intelligence in this wand, that it was no inert piece of wood, but in its own way, curiously alive, although not malevolent. Intrigued, she reached out and took it.

And nearly dropped it in shock. A jolt of raw power ran through her as her fingers curled around it, followed by a sense of recognition and a feeling of having come home. With a shock, she realised that this was the wand itself feeling like this, that the wave of exultation now rising within her was no less than the wand rejoicing at finding an owner once more. Gazing at it in adoration, she lifted it high, watching the firelight reflecting in the blackness. Mine, she thought. You were meant to be mine from the start, Medea Tyler's legacy to the Second Heir. Experimentally, she waved it.

A ball of blue fire shot out of the end and hit Caitlin's bookshelf, setting it on fire. Caitlin shrieked and raced over to it, dowsing it liberally in fire extinguishing charms. The fire was soon out, although the bookshelf didn't look like it'd ever be the same again.

"Sorry!" gasped Luella in horror. "I didn't know it'd do that!"

Caitlin smiled weakly. "It's alright, love. Not your fault, but be careful in future. African magic pulls no punches and that wand has Tal-y-Rhys power mixed in too." She turned back to the bookcase, now charred at one end, and fixed it with a few more charms to stop it collapsing. "Ah well, at least the books are alright. And thank Hecate I don't keep the really dangerous books on that one."

"Dangerous books?" Severus's attention was caught. "You've got some dangerous Dark Arts manuals lying around?"

"Maybe." said Caitlin mysteriously. "And no I am not letting you study them. Or you, Luella."

Luella couldn't hide her disappointment, and she noticed Severus wasn't particularly happy either. However, she was more concerned about the damaged bookshelf.

"Sorry about the shelves though, Caitlin. They weren't an ancient family heirloom, were they?"

Caitlin shook her head with a smile. "19.99 from Ikea. Don't worry, there's more where they came from." Here, a rather less pleasant smile appeared. "You can help me pick a new one."

"Great." muttered Luella. She'd never liked furniture or DIY stores - childhood afternoons spent trailing round B&Q or Do It All after her parents had left their mark. "That'll be fun."

"I can see you're going to be having an interesting time here, Luella." Severus remarked. "Do enjoy yourself, won't you?"

"If she lets me." Luella muttered darkly.

"That's a point." said Caitlin thoughtfully as she returned to the sofa, the other two following her. "What are we going to do with you? I mean, I know I said you'd be staying here earlier, but now I think of it, you might be better off with your own parents."

"The thought of having to provide regular, well-balanced meals hitting home, is it Caitlin?" laughed Severus.

"No." snapped Caitlin, although Luella could tell that his comment wasn't entirely off the mark. "Just that I don't like the thought of keeping all this from the Martins. I mean, for Luella to stay here, unknown, I'd have to keep her inside the whole time, insist on her using Glamoury when she did go out, have to make sure her parents

didn't see anything unusual. It's a big strain, and we're going to need all the strength we can get. I really feel we should reduce the need for secrecy by telling her parents something, and if we can do that, then she can stay with them and at least live in her own home."

Luella went pale. "You're not going to tell them I've been expelled!" she gasped.

Caitlin shook her head. "No, of course not! Severus and I will make sure that they don't overreact."

"And Memory Charm them if they do." Severus added.

"You're going to lie to them?" Luella asked, stunned.

"Not quite." said Caitlin, squirming. "Just... not quite tell them everything."

Luella still felt dubious about this. "I'm still not sure. It sounds... unethical."

"You want us to tell them the truth?" asked Severus derisively.

"Well, no." admitted Luella.

"Exactly." Severus folded his arms. "Luella, they may be your parents, but they're still only Muggles. They won't understand all the issues. Some Muggles do, but not, I think, your family. At the end of the day, you're not really one of them, you're a witch. And there will always be a part of your life you can't share with them."

"Suppose." sighed Luella, dejected. Caitlin put her arms around the teenager.

"Don't worry, love. It'll be alright. We'll make sure they understand everything and aren't too upset. At least this way you get to see them, and don't have to sneak around hoping they don't see you."

"Guess so." Luella yawned, suddenly realising how exhausted she was.

Caitlin patted her on the shoulder. "You look worn out, dear. Tell you what, Severus and I will go over to your parents now and have a word with them. You go to bed. You can have Deanna's room. Spend the night here, and we'll move you over there tomorrow. Is that alright?"

Luella nodded, feeling wearier by the second. And so, bidding goodnight to Caitlin and Severus, she went to bed.

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Much later, Severus and Caitlin emerged from the Martins' house.

"Well. That went better than expected." sighed Caitlin as she let them both back in.

"It could have been worse." Severus agreed. "We only had to resort to fast talking a couple of times, and we didn't need too much charm and manipulation either."

"At least they didn't threaten to stop Luella having anything to do with magic again." said Caitlin, just a little too brightly.

"Mr. Martin only just restrained himself though." Severus pointed out. "Can't say I blame him - if anyone had told me Deanna was at risk of being attacked at school by some maniac with a grudge, I'd have hit the roof myself."

"I thought you handled him very well." Caitlin soothed him. "I especially liked the way you said that all Muggle-born children were being sent home as a precautionary measure. Kind of took the heat off Luella."

"Why, thank you." Severus smiled. "You did rather well with the whole 'as a parent myself...' routine. Well done. And I only noticed you use Glamour three times."

"Yeah, when I went in, while I was there and when I left." laughed Caitlin. "Still, they seem to have calmed down, they're more than willing to have Luella back, they don't think she's to blame for anything in the slightest, and they're going to let her come over here for her studies. All things considered, I think we can count this evening a success."

In more ways than one, Severus thought, suddenly realising he was now alone with Caitlin and making sure he had a clear run for the door. Still, she didn't seem dangerous right now, although he knew better than anyone how that was often the worst time. However, he didn't think she'd attack him again. Her old rage seemed to have been expended during his last visit here, and now he just sensed sadness. But that didn't mean he wasn't afraid.

Caitlin had fallen silent herself, and Severus could tell she knew what was on his mind. She looked as awkward as a teenager on her first date.

"So, er, do you want a drink or anything? Coffee, tea, something stronger? I've got some Jack Daniels in if you want a JD and Coke."

"Um, no. No thanks." Severus glanced at the door, suddenly experiencing a yearning to be back in his dungeon quarters, curled up with the Hogwarts copy of the Necronomicon and a good brandy. "I'd better be going, it's getting late."

"OK." Caitlin seemed resigned. "Thanks, Severus, you've been wonderful. A great help. I couldn't have handled all this without you." She stepped forward, causing him to shrink away. Don't hurt me again, he silently pleaded, trying to banish the image of him lying helpless and naked on the floor, with Caitlin standing over him like some terrifying ancient Mother Goddess. But this time, all she did was place her hands gently on his shoulders, stand on tiptoes and kiss him once on the cheek, making him shudder violently in terror. But a terror that had a disturbingly erotic tinge to it. Her touch, her very nearness, every searing memory of her hands on his body as she gratified her rage and lust for revenge made him tremble, terrified it might be repeated, praying that she might do it again.

He lifted his eyes and gazed directly into hers. He didn't detect Glamoury being used, and yet he still felt like he was in some kind of trance as he found himself bending down and closing his eyes, bringing his lips to meet those lifted upwards in anticipation, feeling flesh meeting, lips parting, tongues entwining and arms sliding around each other as a tentative kiss turned into something rather more full on.

Until whatever spell had held them both broke, and Severus felt the terror come rushing back. Thrusting her away in a manner his younger self would have had an apoplectic fit over, he staggered backwards, reaching for the door.

Caitlin had leapt back herself, stunned at her bravado and surprisingly contrite.

"Severus, I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me!" she gasped.

Once upon a time, a witty comeback along the lines of "me if you carry on like that" would have leapt immediately to his lips. Not now.

"Caitlin, I... don't... please don't... don't hurt me..." he stammered.

"No. No, I won't." she whispered, standing back and holding her palms up. "Don't worry, I won't touch you. Listen, I... I think you'd better go. I... don't think you should be alone with me, I don't trust myself."

Severus nodded, glad of the reprieve. "Yes. Yes, I think I'd better... Er, it was nice to see you again, Caitlin, it's been a productive evening and no doubt I'll see you again soon. Goodbye." With that, he darted out of the front door before that voice that haunted his dreams could say another word and summon him back.

Caitlin closed the door behind him, leaning against it for support, cursing her foolishness. Why on earth had she let her self-control go like that? Of course he wouldn't want to touch her, and not here of all places, not after last time. And yet she couldn't shake the memory of that kiss, completely unplanned and unlooked-for, and so spine-tinglingly pleasurable. What she wouldn't give to have more of that! One day, Cait, one day, she told herself. Until then, the memory and her own imagination would have to do. And with that in mind, she headed for bed.

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The atmosphere at Hogwarts was scarcely less tense. Deanna had returned to the Slytherin Common Room after her battle with Ron still covered in blood. Nothing had been said - when Deanna was in that sort of mood with all too visible evidence of what had happened to the last poor unfortunate to cross her there for all to see, no one dared to ask any questions - but all guessed that whoever had shopped Luella had been dealt with. Draco and friends in particular had looked rather nervous and immediately busied themselves with their work, not daring to meet Deanna's eyes, although in that last respect they were hardly alone.

In the days that followed, no one mentioned the expulsion. It was a topic none spoke of out loud, for fear of angering Deanna. However, there was an unspoken sense that Luella was not to blame, that she'd almost certainly been framed... and that even if she

hadn't and there was some truth to it all, she was still very much one of them. It wasn't said out loud, but it was there. There in the way even Deanna's enemies treated her without malice, there in the way no one used it to gain political advantage, there in the way the entire house seemed to close ranks against the rest of the school, cooling relations with non-Slytherin friends, not rejoicing in the Heir's supposed capture, walking away when others spoke of it. Deanna and her friends for their part didn't say thank you for the tacit support, but they knew it was there and appreciated it.

Support also came from the most unlikely of places - outside of Slytherin House itself, the biggest support came from the archrivals Gryffindor. Harry routinely pulled his wand out on anyone who talked ill of Luella in his hearing, Hermione gave Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil the sharp end of her tongue when they dared to gossip about the fallen Slytherin, and perhaps the biggest surprise of all, Ron came right out in support of her.

It happened a few days after Luella's departure. On the way to lunch, Marlie saw her Clearwater cousins in the Entrance Hall and ran over to them, not having really spoken to them properly since Penelope had been Petrified.

"Hey guys." she smiled. "How've you been? I mean, what with the whole Penny thing and all."

They didn't return her smile. Paul seemed indifferent, while Rachel was positively hostile.

"What's it to you, Slytherin?" she snapped at her cousin. Marlie recoiled, stunned at her vehemence.

"She's my cousin, Rach, I care about her!" she cried. "What's your problem?"

"Do we have to spell it out, Marlie?" sighed Paul.

"Cut her some slack, Pauly, sensitivity never was her strong point." Rachel sneered. "Or she'd know better than to come swanning around here like nothing ever happened when her best mate Petrified our sister!"

Marlie froze. But not for long. Fury wasn't far behind. "She didn't do it!" yelled Marlie. "You really think I'd hang around with the Heir of Slytherin? As if, man. As if!"

"You expect us to believe that?" Rachel laughed. "What do you take us for, Lovegood? I mean, really."

Paul tapped his sister on the shoulder, shooting Marlie a look of cold indifference that hurt more than Rachel's anger had done. "Come on, sis. Leave her. Treacherous Slytherin tart's not worth bothering about."

Deanna and Rianne were by Marlie's side in a flash.

"Take it back." hissed Rianne, incandescent with fury.

"Marls is no traitor." said Deanna. "And if you fight her, you fight us."

Rachel shrugged, producing her wand. "Suits me. At least I don't have to worry about the Heir attacking me in my bed any more."

Paul produced his wand, ready to stand by his sister, and some other Ravenclaws emerged as well, ready to help if required.

And as if summoned by some mysterious psychic force, Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle appeared out of nowhere, standing by their fellow Slytherins.

"Marls is my cousin and housemate." Draco announced. "We may have our differences, but I won't stand by and see her insulted. She had nothing to do with your sister's regrettable accident."

Deanna, Rianne and Marlie could only gaze in amazement. Marlie began to smile just a little as Draco gave a small smile and a discreet wink that seemed to say *I haven't forgotten the summer*.

Pansy noticed the disbelieving looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her. "Don't look like that. We stand up for our own."

"News to me." muttered Rianne. Deanna just shrugged.

"Fair enough. Now, Rachel. Ready to back down?"

Rachel just glared, and things could have turned nasty had they not been suddenly interrupted by a voice from the stairs. The voice of Ron Weasley.

"Break it up, you guys."

They all turned to look. And promptly stared in disbelief at Ron Weasley breaking up a fight that involved Slytherins. Ignoring the stares, he descended to ground level and positioned himself between them.

"Weasley, what are you doing?" Deanna demanded.

"Yeah, Weasley, get out of the way, we're trying to kick Ravenclaw butt here." snapped Pansy.

Ron held up his hands. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't stop you, but I'd like to avoid bloodshed if at all possible." He caught Deanna's eye. "There's been enough of that already." Deanna had the grace to look a little guilty.

"Go on then." she heard herself saying. "Say your piece."

"OK." Ron turned to address the Clearwaters. "Right you two, I know Lu Martin's been expelled for hurting your sister. And I know Marls was a friend of hers. But she's still your cousin, man. Does family mean nothing to you at all?"

"That's rich, coming from you!" laughed Rachel.

"Yeah, you've hardly spoken to your sister all year." Paul added.

Ron looked a little non-plussed but swiftly recovered. "Um, yeah. Yeah. It's true. And you know why I haven't spoken to her all year?"

"Why's that then?" yawned Draco.

"Because he's a moron?" Rianne asked, wondering just where this was going. Ron leapt at her words, thankful that he'd never really prized his dignity anyway.

"Yes!" he yelled. "She's absolutely right! Because I'm a moron!"

"Boy, you can say that again." Pansy commented. Ron ignored her.

"It's true!" he continued. "I am a divot. A complete and total prat. There aren't many stupider than me. All the time, I do idiotic and prattish things and sometimes even I don't know why! Ask anyone. My housemates. My friends. Ask Harry, he'll give you a list." He indicated a watching Harry, who was nodding wholeheartedly. "Ask my family. My brothers'll be the first to agree. Won't you, lads?" He turned to Fred and George, who'd approached to offer Marlie a hand when the fight had first threatened to break out.

"Absolutely." Fred nodded.

"Too right." George agreed. "Everyone else got nicknames like Bill, Charlie, Perce, Freddy Boy and Gin. He got landed with Idiot."

"Some people reckon he's a few cards short of a Tarot Deck, but we don't think that's true."

"In his case, the entire Major Arcana's missing."

"In fact, Ron was so stupid as a kid..." Fred was about to continue until Ron interrupted.

"Yes, yes, that's quite enough, we get the picture." He turned back to the Ravenclaws. "See, that's why I've been ignoring Ginny all term. I'm an idiot. You guys, on the other hand, are meant to be Ravenclaws. You guys are meant to be smart! You're meant to not only be able to think, but to bloody well enjoy it! So what's your excuse?"

Rachel didn't answer. She was looking away, rather embarrassed. It was Paul who answered.

"Luella did get expelled for the attacks. And Marlie is still supporting her. Not one word of apology or recompense have we had."

"Well... why should she?" Ron asked. "Wasn't Marls who hurt your sister. In fact, I don't think Lu had anything to do with it either. Why would a Muggle-born attack other Muggle-borns? It doesn't make sense. Unless of course you factor in the fact that this Muggle-born had enemies." Here he shot a dirty look at Draco, who looked innocently away. He turned back to the twins. "I don't know about you, but I don't think the case is closed by a long shot. I think Lu's innocent. And I think you're wrong." He stared at them, daring them to defy him. They didn't. After all, they were Ravenclaws, and fighting is not in their nature. Rachel lowered her eyes, sheathed her wand and, indicating for her housemates and brother to follow, slipped away. Nearby, Draco breathed a sigh of relief and made his own exit, his friends behind him. Leaving Ron alone with Deanna, Marlie and Rianne.

It was Marlie who spoke first. "You didn't have to do that!" she blurted out. "We could have handled it."

"I know," said Ron. "But I thought I'd better step in. I felt like I owed you guys. I thought it needed to be said that it wasn't Luella. Especially by me." Here he looked Deanna square in the eyes. She met his gaze with a look that seemed to be weighing him up very carefully. Finally, she gave a small smile.

"You know Ron, you were wrong, you know."

"About what?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"About being an idiot. That was one of the smartest things you've done in ages." She gave a cursory nod. "Gryffindors do have their uses after all. See you later, Ron." She indicated for the others to follow her and the three of them went for lunch.

Ron watched them go, puzzled. He never could work Slytherins out. Especially not when Slytherins who'd previously hated each other were now joining forces. Bizarre.

He turned round and noticed Harry and Hermione watching him. He wandered over, noticing that Harry looked a little less hostile than usual.

"So, er, how's things?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Lu's still not here." Harry said, glaring at him. "And now is a little late to come out in her favour and decide she's innocent. Shame you didn't think that before you went running to Malfoy." With that, he turned and walked away.

Hermione remained behind, placing a hand on his arm to comfort him. "He'll come around." she said confidently. "He won't hate you forever. You just wait."

"Yeah, but for how long?" sighed Ron, depressed. "I am a grade A moron, Herm. Why'd I do it?"

The first hint of disapproval flickered across Hermione's face. "Well, I'm sure you had your reasons, Ron." she said stiffly. But the look soon faded. "That was a very brave thing you did just then, Ron. I'm proud of you. Well done."

"Cheers. Glad someone thinks it was a good idea. Poor old Marls, though. She used to hang around with the Clearwaters all the time, she's going to be miserable without them."

"She's still got Deanna and Rianne." Hermione reminded him.

"Yeah, but they're not family, are they?" said Ron.

"No, suppose not. And talking of family." Hermione indicated the redhaired youngster watching them from the stairwell. Ginny. Ron turned and saw her watching him, wide-eyed. He turned back to Hermione, who was giving him a meaningful look.

"Should I talk to her then?" he asked halfheartedly.

Hermione nodded. "Seeing as you've publicly admitted you've been acting like an idiot all year by ignoring her, and have just told the Clearwaters off for fighting family, I think you better had, hadn't you?"

Ron groaned. "Suppose I'd better. Wish me luck, Hermi." He turned and approached Ginny.

She didn't turn away as he drew near, just kept watching him warily as if he was some kind of wild beast that could pounce at any second. He didn't really blame her.

"So, er, Ginny, how've you been? How's Slytherin House taking things?"

Ginny shrugged. "As well as can be expected. Everyone's still in shock at the moment."

"Have they started planning the lynching yet?"

She shook her head. "No. That's Deanna's prerogative and word is she's already done it. No one knows for sure though. Everyone's too scared to ask her."

"Smart move." Ron agreed. "I wouldn't want to be on her bad side." Not again, anyway. That was one lesson he wouldn't forget in a hurry. "Do you guys reckon she did it?"

"No way." The statement left no room for debate, yet next minute her composure cracked and she was in tears. "It wasn't her, couldn't have been! She didn't do it, she didn't do it, she's innocent, it wasn't her Ron!" she sobbed. "They're wrong, they're wrong, and now she's gone, her life's ruined and we're all in danger! She didn't do it, Ron!" With that, she started crying in earnest.

Ron really was at a loss now. He never had been any good at dealing with crying women, not that he'd had much practice, and when he knew it was his fault, it was even worse. However, he tried his best.

"Gin! Don't cry! Please!" he begged, putting an arm round her and fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief. "It'll be alright. She'll come back. You just watch."

Ginny refused to be comforted. "She won't! The governors all think she did it, they'll never let her come back!"

"They will." said Ron, suddenly fierce at the thought of his sister being upset. "You're forgetting that Deanna Tyler's on the case. She'll find out who really did it, and give 'em hell. And then Luella'll be cleared and she'll be on the next train back. You'll see!"

If anything, Ginny only cried all the harder.

"What?" asked Ron, now really confused. "What's the matter?"

Ginny shook her head. "I can't... I can't tell you, Ron!" she sobbed. "Don't ask me! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?" asked Ron, perplexed. "What for? You've done nothing wrong! I'm the one who should be apologising. I've been rotten to you all year, and generally making your life a misery, and what for? Because you ended up in Slytherin. Of all the stupid, trivial reasons to cut somebody..." He shook his head in sorrow. "Some of the Slyths have more integrity than us Gryffindors. Even Malfoy's got a weird sense of honour underneath all the viciousness." He gave Ginny the first real smile she'd seen from him in a while. "I'm no better than the worst Slytherin, you know."

"Ron, that's not true..." Ginny began, but he cut her off.

"No, Gin, it's the truth. I'm not saying why, but trust me, I'm no angel. I've certainly got no right to pick on you. Gin, can you ever forgive me?"

Ginny looked up at him, amazed at his change in attitude. Slowly, she began to smile weakly before nodding. "OK." she whispered.

Ron sighed, suddenly feeling a weight slip from his mind. Smiling, he opened his arms and pulled Ginny into a hug.

"Thanks, sis." he said softly. "Whatever your ambitions, if you need any help, you know where to find me."

Ginny responded by returning the hug, burying her head in his robes. Ron just cuddled her, feeling profoundly relieved that at least one problem was now sorted out. However, had he seen the look on Ginny's face, one of apprehension and fear, he'd have had rather less to smile about.

They stayed like that for a while until a voice from the shadows interrupted them. Draco.

"So are you two talking again then?"

Ron released Ginny and looked up sharply. There he was, alone, leaning against the wall in the entrance to the dungeons, with that usual mocking grin that Ron always felt the urge to slap out of him firmly in place.

"Go away, Malfoy." he said through gritted teeth.

Draco just shrugged. "Alright, alright. I just wanted to make sure you really meant what you said earlier, that's all."

"Draco." said Ginny timidly. "Don't worry. We'll be fine. It's all OK now. Me and Ron have sorted things out."

Draco nodded. "Good." He paused. "It's about bloody time. See you later, Weasleys." With that, he turned and left. Ron turned to Ginny.

"How can you put up with him in your common room every day?"

"He's not that bad." said Ginny, a little defensively. "I mean, he's alright to me. Most of the time." she added.

"Well, you're a bloody saint for tolerating him, Gin." said Ron. "Anyway, I suppose I'll see you around?"

Ginny nodded. She looked up, an idea suddenly occurring to her. "Ron, wanna have lunch with me?"

"Lunch? With you?" Ron stared at her. "What, at the Slytherin table?"

Ginny nodded.

"Ber-loody hell, Gin, your lot'll probably want to kill me." Ron thought of the way they were all standing by Luella, and the fact that some of them knew all about his role in getting her expelled in the first place. No, they were definitely not going to want him at their table.

Ginny shook her head. "No they won't. You stood up for them. They won't forget that. At the very least it'll cancel out whatever else you might have done. Anyway," and here she smiled mischievously, "you're my brother. I'll make sure they don't hurt you."

Ron considered this for a minute. It was true, Deanna at least seemed to bear him no hostility any more. And if Deanna accepted him, then the others would probably follow her lead. He thought briefly of what Harry and Hermione would say. Then realised that Harry couldn't hate him any more than he already did, and that Hermione would be too pleased that he'd made up with Ginny to say anything else.

"Alright then. You got yourself a deal."

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Chapter Twenty Four Friday Night Armistice

Nothing of major import in Slytherin House happened after that. True, most of the school was taking pains to avoid them. And true, its inhabitants were generating more dark whispers in corners than usual. However, the Slytherins themselves were oddly calm. The willingness of the Weasley boys, not to mention Harry and Hermione, to stand up for them had touched quite a few Slytherins and consequently, there was very little of the usual fighting with Gryffindor. Taunts and whispers that would once have resulted in a fight, or the threat of one, now simply caused Slytherins to walk away. That and a desire to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble. Even Slytherins could have too much notoriety.

Relations inside the house were also notably friendlier. It was as if the perceived slight towards Slytherin had caused an unspoken agreement that, whatever their differences, they would pull together and support each other - for now, anyway. All the usual feuds and rivalries had been suspended, and Slytherins once at each other's throats now appeared to be behaving themselves.

This even held true for Draco and friends, and Deanna, Marlie and Rianne. To a point. While it was true that Deanna was loath to forgive Draco, and had refrained from punishing him only because he wasn't nearly so easy a target as Ron, Draco by contrast was singularly failing to taunt Deanna over losing her best friend. In fact, not a smirk had been seen. He'd kept himself to himself, barely even looked in Deanna's direction and on the few occasions they'd had to speak, had been worryingly polite almost to the point of humility.

Needless to say, this was not in character behaviour, and Draco's friends were noticing.

"So what's up with him anyway?" Pansy whispered to Crabbe one evening, watching Draco staring mindlessly into space.

"I don't know." said Crabbe, a little anxious himself. "He's been like this ever since Martin got kicked out. Really quiet and not saying much. Not very triumphant at all."

"Can't blame him there." said Pansy quietly. "I don't feel particularly triumphant myself. I feel like there's this bloody great big knife floating behind me about to stab me in the back at any time."

"Nah, that's fear of Tyler." said Crabbe. "Completely normal. Malfoy on the other hand... Scared isn't the word I'd use. I don't know what it is, it's like he wishes he hadn't done it, but not because he's scared Tyler's going to take some horrible revenge on him. He looks sad more than scared."

"You don't think it's that leaving speech of Martin's, do you?" Pansy asked, thinking back to the day Luella had left. Her parting words to Malfoy had had all the hallmarks of an ancient curse, and now it seemed to be coming true.

"Surely not." Crabbe said dismissively. "Martin's good, but not that good. And he's not the type to believe in things like that, is he? He must be the least suggestible person I know."

Pansy peered at him again. "You don't think he's feeling guilty, do you?"

"Can't be. Can he?" Crabbe looked at Draco again. "Blimey, Pansy, I didn't know he could feel guilty, not about hurting Tyler anyhow."

"Maybe it's not Tyler." said Pansy reflectively. "Maybe it's Lovegood."

"Lovegood?" Crabbe stared at her. "Are you sure?"

"Could be. She is his cousin after all, and he is remarkably fond of all her Muggle stuff."

Crabbe didn't seem able to believe what he was hearing. "Yeah, but... she's a half-blood."

"So's his mother." Pansy pointed out. "And you know how he feels about her."

Crabbe did know only too well. Narcissa Malfoy was considered sacrosanct and no one, not even his friends, dared utter a word against her in Draco's hearing.

"And," Pansy pressed, "you too own a Walkmage. Not to mention several Muggle rock CDs. So don't tell me you're completely against Muggle technology!"

"Well, not in principle." Crabbe muttered. "Just a shame the Muggles had to develop it - it's entirely too good for them."

"You'll be taking down your Nirvana posters then." Pansy snapped. A note of panic crept into Crabbe's eyes.

"Not my Kurt Cobain poster." he whimpered. "I like that one!"

"My point exactly." Pansy sat back and folded her arms, her point proved to her satisfaction. "And who introduced you to all this Muggle culture?"

"Lovegood did." muttered Crabbe.

"Precisely. Now, look at her. Which member of Draco's family does Marlene Lovegood most resemble? Here's a hint - I just mentioned her earlier."

"His mum?" Crabbe looked at Marlie, comparing her to Narcissa Malfoy as he'd last seen her. Pansy was right. "Bloody Hades, they do look alike, don't they?"

"Exactly." said Pansy, rather smug at having successfully found the cause of Draco's apparent depression. "Now, given that Draco is quite taken by some Muggle stuff, and has been introduced to it by a cousin of his who looks just like his adored mother, is it

not natural that he's going to feel a little guilty about getting one of her mates expelled? Especially after she publicly slaps him and yells abuse at him."

"Suppose." Crabbe admitted. He turned back to Draco. "But he shouldn't do, it's a bloodfeud, and Lovegood's on the wrong side."

"Doesn't mean a thing." Pansy sighed. "You can be at war with someone's family and still like them personally. All the best tragedies are made up of that."

Crabbe just groaned. "Gods, Pansy, you and your bloody star-crossed lovers romances." He shot another glance at Draco. "He will snap out of it, won't he?"

"Hope so." Here, a note of anxiety entered Pansy's voice. "I mean, he's not in love with her or anything. I'm sure he'll be OK."

Crabbe forced some confidence into his own demeanour. "Yeah. Yeah, he'll be OK. He just needs time to get his head round the idea."

"Course he will."

"Of course."

However, Draco's strange behaviour did not change. Time passed, the Easter holidays came and went, and still he remained penitent. And Draco himself was no less confused than his friends were about the cause. So confused, that uncharacteristically for him, he decided to seek advice.

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The rather subdued knocking at his office door caused Severus to look up with a start. Friday afternoon was not a usual time for students to call on him, not voluntarily anyway. He glanced at his detentions book. Some Hufflepuffs due in for a detention that evening, and a Gryffindor fifth year scheduled for clearing out the cauldrons at four o'clock. That was it.

Very unusual. He whistled Corvus over.

"Corvus, go and find out who that is."

"*Getting up and opening the door yourself too much work, is it?*" the raven snapped as he fluttered across the room, peered through the keyhole in the door and flew back to Severus's shoulder.

"Well?" he asked the bird.

"*Dragon-boy. Looking rather pensive, I must say. Not his usual superior self at all. What've you got him down for then? Must be pretty unpleasant for him to look like that.*" "Nothing." Severus murmured. He paused, certain suspicions making themselves felt. "Yet. Well, we shall see, won't we? Better find out what he wants." He raised his voice. "Come in, Malfoy. And close the door behind you, won't you?"

Draco entered, blinking in astonishment. "How'd you know it was me?" he demanded.

"I have my methods." Severus replied enigmatically. Much as he liked the boy, it wasn't good to reveal all his little trade secrets. Better to keep this one in awe. "Well, well, come in boy, take a seat, make yourself at home. What are you after now? I might as well tell you now that I am not going to mark up any of your Potions work, not that you need it, nor am I going to teach you anything Dark Arts related, not that I'd know in any case."

Draco looked disbelieving but didn't comment. Who knew what his parents had told him about the past? However, it seemed that the boy had other reasons for being here. For once.

"No, don't worry, sir, it's nothing like that. I, er..." Here he hesitated, seemingly uncertain as to what to tell him. Severus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. What on earth had Malfoy been up to now?

"I, er... need some advice." the boy said haltingly. Severus narrowed his eyes.

"What sort of advice?"

"Er..." Draco paused again, getting his thoughts in order. Finally he let it out. "I did something that, um, caused a lot of trouble for certain people. At the time, I thought it was a good idea, but now I, er, kind of wish I hadn't done it."

Severus didn't comment, merely raising an eyebrow. Give a man enough rope and he will surely hang himself at some point. "Go on."

"Erm... well..." Draco's hesitancy finally gave way to a helpless fury. "Make it stop! Please! I hate feeling like this, I hate feeling like such a git, I hate feeling wrong!" he snarled. "I shouldn't feel this way, I should be glad for scoring such a victory over her, I should be rubbing it in her face, and instead I'm feeling like I'm the one who's lost..." He stopped himself just in time. "Who's lost." he finished lamely.

"I see." said Severus, guessing only too well what Draco was referring to. However, he checked the impulse to give the boy his worst. A Malfoy actually feeling guilty was a rare occurrence indeed, and Severus didn't want to discourage the first feeble stirrings of a conscience by killing it before it could grow. He held his tongue and waited to see what else Draco would tell him.

"I can't stand it." said Draco softly. "I can't take much more of this. I hate feeling like this, I hate myself so much, and I hate *her* for making me feel like this! Gods damn it, but I don't even like her, why do I feel so bad about hurting her?" He turned to Severus, eyes silently pleading. "Help me, sir. Help me make it stop, make it go away!"

"Well, we shall see." Severus replied, voice as smooth as ever. "This person who you were aiming to injure, had she done anything wrong to you?"

"Kind of." said Draco uncertainly. "She'd hurt some friends of mine."

"I see." He was right. He could see all too clearly where this was going. "Do you think she may have been justified in hurting those friends of yours?"

"Er... maybe." Draco admitted. "I mean, she only did it because they hurt a friend of hers."

"And that friend of hers, is she also someone you yourself have a fairly high regard for?" Severus let him have it with the full, piercing stare that let Draco know that he knew exactly what he was referring to, but was too much the gentleman to say it out loud.

"Er... yes." Draco confessed in a very small voice indeed.

"So, in other words, you are admitting that maybe she was in the right in doing what she did to these friends of yours."

Draco nodded, unable to meet Severus's eyes.

"Which puts your own actions in a rather different light, does it not?"

Again, Draco nodded in silence.

"In that case, I think we have the source of your current ethical agonising right there, don't we?"

"Yes sir." Draco whispered. He finally looked up. "What do I do now, sir? I can't undo it. It's gone too far."

Severus reflected. True, Draco could hardly bring Luella back - the situation was no longer in his hands, hadn't been since he'd told his father what he'd learned from Weasley. However, maybe there were some things he could do.

"Well, Malfoy, it's been a while since I last consulted the Slytherin Code of Honour. However, I think that the usual course of action is to offer the victim an apology."

Draco froze. "An apology?"

"An apology."

The boy couldn't have looked more horrified if he'd been told that his father knew all about those summer trips to the Lovegoods.

"You're not serious."

"I am perfectly serious, Malfoy." Severus tried not to look too pleased at Malfoy's reaction. "Do you want to stop feeling guilty or not?"

"Yes, but..." Draco looked as if he'd almost rather have the guilt. "Apologise? Do I have to? I mean, can't I just give her the head of her worst enemy instead as a peace offering?"

"Her worst enemy?" Severus regarded him coolly, this time allowing a smile to escape. "That's you, isn't it?"

"Good point." Draco sighed, before bowing to the inevitable. "Alright, alright. I'll do it. Is there anything else?"

"Some form of compensation may be required."

"Will money do it?" Draco asked hopefully. He caught the look Severus was giving him. "No it won't, will it?"

"No. It will not. You will have to ask her and see what she wants. Unless you know of something within your power to deliver that she might conceivably want."

Draco fell silent at this, suddenly looking incredibly thoughtful. "You know, sir, I might just have the very thing. Well," and here a look of pain crossed his face, "two things really. But I'm hoping I won't have to use the other one. Father wouldn't be happy with me at all, and I think my friends would crucify me." He got up to leave. "Thanks sir. You've been really helpful."

"I like to think so." Severus murmured, pleased that Draco was not wholly beyond saving. Well done Luella, he thought, there's one Slytherin redeemed and you're not even here. "Good luck with your little discussion, Malfoy, I do hope it works out. But you may be in luck. I'm sure that an apology is the last thing she'll be expecting, so you'll be able to catch her off guard. Besides, I have it on very good authority that Miss Tyler's initial rage caught some other poor unfortunate instead, so she will be more mellow than previously and less likely to strangle you. Now. Good day, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco felt his blood freeze as his teacher finally uttered Deanna's name and hints became certainty.

"Sir, I... I'm sorry, I..."

"Yes, Malfoy, you've made your reasons abundantly clear. Good *day*, Malfoy."

"Yes, sir." He was about to leave when a sudden burst of curiosity caught him. "Sir... did she hurt Weasley a lot?"

"That, Malfoy, is none of your business." Severus folded his arms and looked straight at him with the all too familiar look that seemed to see right through you. "Let's just say matters were settled to her satisfaction." He looked meaningfully at the boy. Draco was not slow in taking the hint.

"I see. Well, in that case, I'll be off. Be seeing you, sir." And with that, he left before that look of Veritaserum could unearth any more secrets. Leaving a contented Severus looking forward to hearing the results.

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The results weren't slow in coming. Resolving to get it over with, Draco approached Deanna that very evening.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped at him, irritated at being interrupted in the middle of her Charms homework.

"Yeah, Malfoy, she's working." called Rianne. "It doesn't happen often, don't stop her for gods' sake."

Draco ignored her. "Tyler, can we talk?"

"I've got nothing to say to you, Malfoy." Deanna turned back to her work. Draco was not to be put off. Now he'd committed himself to ritual humiliation, he was determined to go through with it. In fact, he'd damn well make her listen to him if he had to.

"That's fine with me. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. But I've got a few things to say to you, and I'm not going anywhere until I've said them."

Deanna laid down her quill and turned to face him, eyebrow raised, curious but doing her best not to show it. "Really."

"Yes, really." snapped Draco.

Deanna leant back, arms folded. "Go on then."

That threw him. "What, now? Here? In front of everyone?" He shot an anxious glance around the room. Sure enough, everyone else was watching, itching to know how this would turn out and if there'd be blood. Draco began to panic. "Can't we go somewhere a little more private?"

This produced the usual chorus of sneers and insinuations from the watching Slytherins.

"Hey Tyler, looks like you got yourself an admirer!" Mike Lovegood called from across the room, as Marlie dissolved into giggles.

"Private conversations, eh?" Rianne remarked, throwing a knowing glance in Lucas Vetinari's direction. "We've all heard that one before, haven't we?"

"Better watch yourself, Tyler." Lucas smirked. "If he mentions showing you his etchings, make yourself scarce."

Draco had by this time turned a deep shade of crimson, wishing fervently that the ground would swallow him up, or the roof would cave in, anything to escape this. If Severus had been watching, he would have nearly fainted with delight. His plan for chastising Draco was going even better than he had hoped.

Deanna, in contrast, was sitting bolt upright, all icy affronted dignity.

"Draco Malfoy," she announced, "is *not* interested in me. Is he?" She fixed Draco with her most penetrating stare. Draco didn't dare contradict her.

"No, Tyler." he said hastily. "Not in the slightest. I still need to talk to you though. Alone."

Deanna nodded, getting to her feet, curiosity having got the better of her, not to mention a nagging feeling that he wouldn't leave her alone until she'd heard him out. "Alright then. I'll listen. This had better be worth it though." She turned to Rianne, removing a hair from her head and tying it around her friend's wand. "If I'm not back in half an hour, come and find me with the Point Me charm. Bring Marls and a couple of the lads." Rianne nodded, understanding. Deanna turned back to Draco.

"Right, you. Let's talk."

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Deanna led him through the dungeon complex, putting enough distance between them and the common room to deter eavesdroppers, but at the same time, not going so far that assistance would be slow in coming. Draco had no intention of arguing with her - he didn't want to be too far from safety either. He hadn't forgotten the image of Deanna walking zombielike into the Serpents' Nest, blood down her front and on her fingers, not looking at anyone and heading straight for her dorm. No prizes for guessing which poor bastard had fallen foul of her. And if she could hate Ron Weasley that much, how much worse would it be for him? Snape's words came back to him - "Her worst enemy? That's you, isn't it?" Draco began to wish he'd never started this. Still, it was too late to back out now.

Deanna stopped in front of a cell which Draco realised with a shock was the one where Ron had first made that fateful confession. How ironic. Of course, the irony went even deeper than he knew. It was also the scene of Deanna's confrontation with Ron. Which was why she'd chosen it.

"In." she ordered him. Draco obeyed. This was not a good start. He surveyed the dimly lit dungeon again as Deanna lit the torches with a word, noticing with a shiver that there were bloodstains on the floor which he could have sworn hadn't been there last time. He just hoped that his wouldn't be added to them.

Deanna closed the door behind her, although, Draco noticed, she left it unlocked. That gave him a little hope - she too obviously wanted an escape route available. However, he noted she was staying in between him and the door. Not so good.

"So what do you want then, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped, diverting him from his tactical calculations. "This had better be good. And bear in mind you're not my favourite person at the moment."

No change there, then, Draco thought, although he wisely kept that to himself. Keep to the point, Malfoy, he told himself.

"I know." he said, readying himself for his next act, steeling himself for something no Malfoy in the family's entire history had ever done before - apologising to a Tal-y-Rhys. "And that's why I wanted to talk to you. You see..." he paused, trying to find the words. No sense making a bigger fool of himself than he had to, after all. "I mean... what I'm trying to say is..."

"Get on with it, Malfoy." Deanna interrupted. "I don't have all day!"

"OK, OK." snapped Draco. "What I'm trying to say is... I'm sorry."

Deanna stared at him. "Sorry?" she repeated.

Draco nodded. "Yeah. Sorry." Now it was out, he found himself becoming oddly more relaxed. The worst was over.

"What for?" asked Deanna, looking at him rather strangely, seeming completely at a loss to understand him. He didn't blame her. This wasn't something that either of them had ever been told was in the script.

"For..." Draco hung his head. "For telling my father what Ron told me about Luella."

Now Deanna really was staring at him as if he'd gone mad. "You what?"

"You heard." Draco lifted his eyes to glare back at her. "Look, don't play ignorant with me, you must know all about it. It's hardly a secret our families hate each other and my friends have a grudge and a half against you."

"I know all that!" snapped Deanna. "But... you're sorry?!"

"Yeah." Draco nodded. "I'm sorry."

Deanna stared at him for a moment before suddenly exploding. "What do you mean you're sorry?!?" she yelled at him. "You're not meant to be sorry! You're meant to be all cocky and triumphant, strutting around the common room like you own it, sitting there smirking at me and making me feel completely pissed off and powerless. You're meant to lord it over me and bask in the afterglow while I seethe in the shadows, watching and waiting for an opportunity to get revenge! That's what you're meant to do! That's how bloodfeuds work! You're not meant to be sorry!"

Draco raised an eyebrow, determined to brazen it out and secretly rather pleased to have wrongfooted her. "Oh? And why not?"

Deanna seemed lost for words. "Because... because... because it's against the rules!" she spluttered.

"Rules?" Now it was Draco's turn to stare. "We're involved in a mortal bloodfeud that makes the Montague-Capulet feud look like a lovers' tiff, and you're bothered about the rules?"

"Yeah!" shouted Deanna. "Damn you, Malfoy! What's the point of a feud if you start feeling sorry? What's the good in victory if you don't enjoy it? What's the good in losing if you can't console yourself with twisted fantasies of revenge?"

"Spoilt all your fun, have I, Tyler?" Draco murmured, beginning to rather enjoy himself.

"Yes, damn it!" Deanna yelled at him. "All that's been keeping me going since Lu went is dreaming of how many ways I can make you pay! I've spent night after night fantasising about kicking your head in, working out grandiose schemes to humiliate you and bring you to your knees! And now you say you're sorry?!"

Draco stepped back, stunned at her reaction. He'd expected some anger, true. He'd also expected a display of self-righteous smugness and some weird ritual of penance during which he'd have to humiliate himself and serve her every whim. He'd not expected this. She wasn't even trying to take advantage of the situation. If anything, this only made him feel worse.

She was turning away now, hunched up, arms folded, more vulnerable now than he'd ever seen her. And even stranger, he had no desire to take advantage either. In fact, he just wanted to get out. Now.

"You bastard, Malfoy." she whispered. "You have completely and utterly taken away my right to be angry! How on earth am I meant to take a brutal and bloody revenge on someone who's sorry? You complete and utter..." She shook her head, words failing her.

"I'm sorry." Draco whispered, reaching out to touch her shoulder, trying to comfort her. Deanna pushed him away, furious once more.

"Will you stop saying that?" she raged at him. "You know, I really don't get you, Malfoy! One minute you're conspiring to get my friend expelled, the next you're standing up for me in public and acting all contrite in private! One day, you're hanging round at Marlie's playing Sonic and watching videos, and the next gloating because you've taken her old job. What the hell is it with you, Malfoy?" Deanna stared at him, uncomprehending. "Why do you have to be so fucking ambivalent the whole time? Can't you just be our sworn enemy and have done? Or if you must insist on being our friend, can't you just do it and get it over with? Damn it, Malfoy, just pick a side and stick to it!"

"I can't." Draco whispered. This incensed her all the more.

"Why the hell not?" she thundered. Draco just shook his head.

"Not so simple, Tyler. It's easy for you. All your friends, your family, they're all on the same side! They get on. You don't have to worry about your mother disapproving of them, because she likes them all. Because half of them are the children of her best friends anyway." Draco fixed her with a steely, almost vindictive gaze. "You can hang around with pretty much anyone and you don't have to worry about what your parents will say, what your friends will say. Your friends are your friends, and your enemies

are your enemies, and never the twain shall meet. You don't have to worry about the people you like being the ones it's politically inconvenient for you to see. Damn, I envy you sometimes." He turned away, feeling the bitterness of it all come flooding back. He might have taken Marlie's job... but that didn't mean he'd enjoyed it. After all, when his father had announced that he'd just bought seven top flight brooms in order for Draco to finally achieve his Quidditch ambitions, he was hardly going to turn around and say 'Sorry, Dad, I can't do it, Marlie's my friend', was he? Not when your father was Lucius Malfoy, you didn't.

Deanna's anger had abated, at least for now. Right now, she just looked weary, very weary.

"Malfoy, what is it you want me to do?" she sighed. "I can't give you absolution. I can't straighten your life out for you. I can't get Marls to start talking to you again. You'd have to bring Lu back, and resign from the team in Marls's favour, and that's just a start. Too much has happened for me to turn round and forgive you, just like that. Best you can hope for is that I stop hating you."

Draco nodded, hanging his head. It was what he'd expected, more or less, and yet it still hurt. The guilt hadn't really gone, although it wasn't so naggingly insistent, and her firm insistence that the best he could hope for was indifference stung him to depths he hadn't known were there.

"I can't do what you ask." he whispered. "I can't go to Dumbledore and take back everything, Father'd never let her come back anyway. And I can't leave the team either, not after the money Father spent on those brooms, he'd go ballistic." He looked up, eyes gleaming. "But I can do one thing for you. I hear you've been having trouble with the reserve Beaters."

"Possibly." said Deanna, regarding him warily.

"They won't hassle you again." said Draco firmly. He turned to go. "I think I'd better leave."

"I think you better had." said Deanna, by now well over her weirdness quotient, and longing to get as far away from Draco as possible. "Don't let me stop you." She stood aside to let him leave. He did so, not sorry to finally escape, leaving a bewildered Deanna staring after him.

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Draco fairly raced up the passageway, desperate for some kind of sanctuary. Well, it was done. It was over, and Deanna Tyler hadn't given him a thorough going over. But had the alternative been any better? He shook himself, thoroughly unnerved. He'd seen Deanna Tyler vulnerable, and it hadn't been as pleasurable as he'd been led to expect. In fact, more than anything, he'd wanted to run. Run, as he was doing now, trying to get far, far away.

In the end, his footsteps found themselves leading inexorably to where all this had started - Snape's office.

Once more, Draco hadn't even knocked before he heard his House Head's voice calling.

"Come in, Malfoy. Try not to slam the door like you usually do."

Draco opened the door, amazed. "How do you do that?" he demanded.

"Trade secret." Snape told him, clearly amused. Perched on the back of his chair, that damn raven of his that always gave him the creeps fluttered its wings, cawing in a way that sounded eerily like laughter to Draco's ears. "One day, I may tell you what it is."

"Going to be any time soon?" Draco asked half-heartedly as he slumped into the chair opposite.

"Hardly. Maybe after you've finished school." Snape leaned back, dropping the banter and assuming that penetrating look that could unearth secrets faster than a Niffler in Gringotts. "So. May I take it that you've spoken with Miss Tyler?"

Draco nodded.

"And?" Snape probed. "What happened? You're not bleeding so it obviously didn't go too badly."

Draco just laughed. "Yeah? That's what you think. I'd rather have had the beating."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Interesting. Very interesting. I think you had better acquaint me with events."

So Draco did. Snape listened intently, not saying a word, although when Draco told of how Deanna had turned away once her anger was exhausted, her pain at losing her friend there for all to see, his eyes seemed to go cold for just the briefest of moments, although seconds later, the look of concentration was in place once more.

Finally, Draco brought his story to an end. "And that's how it ended." he finished. "With her just standing back and letting me leave. I don't know who was more freaked out by the whole thing, her or me. Can't really blame her, I don't think a Malfoy's ever apologised to a Tal-y-Rhys before."

"Or indeed, to anyone else for that matter." Snape murmured, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "But you still haven't told me why you'd rather have had the beating."

"Isn't it obvious?" Draco laughed.

Snape shook his head. "Not immediately. Suppose you tell me more?"

"I hurt her, sir." said Draco quietly, not meeting his teacher's eyes. "The whole Luella expulsion thing, it really hurt her. I thought she'd be OK about it. Well, not OK, but I thought she'd understand that it wasn't personal, not really. She's a Tal-y-Rhys, I'm a Malfoy, it's what we do. We're meant to do anything possible to undermine each other,

that's what a bloodfeud means. I thought she'd brood over it and then start planning revenge. I didn't realise it'd upset her that much."

"You didn't think seeing her best friend wrongly expelled would get to her?" asked Snape, more than a little derision on his voice.

"Well, no. I mean, yes. I mean, I knew she wouldn't like it, but I didn't think it would hurt her so much. She seemed really upset." Draco stared gloomily into the empty fireplace. "This isn't how I thought it would go at all."

"Strange." Snape murmured, the light of comprehension dawning in his eyes. "That sounds rather like what Miss Tyler said to you earlier, that you weren't sticking to the bloodfeud rules."

Draco managed a small smile. "Yeah, it does, doesn't it? Ironical, eh?"

"Not really." Snape shrugged. "The victim isn't meant to feel pain, only anger and hate, the victor isn't meant to feel guilty but triumphant. According to the usual rules, the two warring sides are meant to hide their true feelings from each other. Were it not for the frequently very serious consequences, is it not the case that bloodfeuds are approached almost like a game by the participants?"

"Well, yeah." Draco admitted.

"Indeed. Except it's not a game any more, is it?"

"No." whispered Draco, his voice almost imperceptible now. Snape's gaze didn't let up for a second.

"My point exactly. Things just got serious, didn't they? You just discovered that your actions went far deeper than you imagined, and now you can't emotionally distance yourself any more, can you? You've had a glimpse of her true feelings, her true nature, and now you can't quite pigeonhole her as one of the enemy Tal-y-Rhys any more, can you?"

Draco shook his head, no longer trusting himself to speak. Everything Snape was saying made a horrible, gut-churning sense.

"In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, you're finally seeing her as human."

Draco finally met Snape's eyes. "Why?" he asked. "Why do things have to be so complicated? Why can't it be simple for once? Why can't I just see her as the enemy and be through with it? Why'd I have to start respecting her?"

"Could that be because Miss Tyler's more than worth respecting?" Snape asked idly, secretly wondering what had taken Malfoy so long to work that one out.

Draco just laughed. "Gods, yeah. Tyler, of all people. You know, I didn't think I was the compassionate type. Hurting Potter or Weasley, or Longbottom, that's second nature. I'd love to see them upset because of something I did."

Snape privately thought otherwise, but didn't contradict him. Let the boy speak, he counselled himself.

"But Tyler, on the other hand..." Draco continued. "She's different! She's not like Longbottom, she's not weak. She's tougher than her Doc Martens. She's not meant to run off crying, she's strong, she's in control, she's a Slytherin, for gods sake!" He shook his head. "I feel like such a heel."

From across the desk, the raven crowed again, with what could only be described as sarcasm. Snape scratched the bird under its beak.

"*Ssh, Corvus, you're not helping.*" he murmured. Draco looked up with a start.

"What was that?" he asked, wondering what on earth his teacher had just said.

"Nothing of importance." Snape said, just a little too quickly. "You were saying?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. Just that the likes of Longbottom cry at anything. For Tyler to be upset, it must have really got to her. Damn it!" He slammed his hand on to the arm of his chair. "Why is my life so complicated? Why can't I just choose a side and stick to it?"

Snape just tilted his head to one side and looked at the boy. "Well, why do you think that is?"

Draco shrugged. "Gods know. I used to pick on them the whole time. Used to love making their lives hell. Then I ended up teaming up with Marls to play this practical joke on Tyler."

"What happened?" asked Snape, recalling an occasion the previous year when an angry, overprotective Deanna had burst in on a Quidditch tuition season he'd been receiving from Caitlin, almost certainly as a result of something Marlene and Draco had said to her.

Draco couldn't help grinning at the memory. "Worked a treat. Poor old Tyler, she was well and truly stitched up. A beautiful, beautiful moment."

"And?" Snape prodded.

"And, er, in the celebratory aftermath, I couldn't help thinking that Marls was actually rather cool, seeing as she masterminded the thing." Draco admitted. "I began to wonder if maybe we had a fair bit in common after all. She's a lot like how I sometimes imagine Mother to have been when she was younger, especially looks wise."

"True enough." Snape responded. He'd noted the resemblance between Marlene and Narcissa long ago, although he also wished Marlene had inherited her aunt's inherent poise and dignity. Narcissa would never have had anything to do with the Weasley twins, and she rarely if ever misbehaved. "They are very similar."

"Exactly." said Draco. "Now you see why I started to think she wasn't so bad. The fact that she'd completely transformed the common room helped too. You can't spend all that time listening to Muggle tunes, doing your homework by lava lamp and watching Chris Bryant and Winter Montague re-enacting scenes from Red Dwarf without starting to appreciate certain aspects of Muggle culture, after all."

"Red Dwarf?" Snape couldn't help but wonder. It sounded ominously like a resurrection of something from the Death Eater days.

"Muggle TV series." Draco explained. "Apparently Bryant gets his brother to record it, and gets all the Slytherin fourth year lads round at his place over the summer to watch it. The girls have been known to go quite a bit as well. I wouldn't mind going myself, I've seen Marlie's collection and it's a brilliant show... ah." He stopped, realising he'd just let his secret slip. Snape wasn't saying anything, but the knowing look on his face was unmistakable.

"Go on, Malfoy." he coaxed. "You were saying you've seen Marlene Lovegood's video collection. Which, unless she's now transported the delights of television to the Serpents' Nest, means you've been to her house, haven't you?"

"Don't tell my parents. Please!" Draco begged. "Father would kill me, or worse, disown me, if he knew! And Mother would be so disappointed in me. It'd break her heart. Please!"

"Don't fret, Malfoy." Snape reassured him. "I won't say a word, although I think you underestimate your mother's fortitude and love for you. Nevertheless, you have your father's reaction down perfectly, so I will say nothing. Besides, I already knew."

"You... knew?" Draco blinked. "But... how?"

"You didn't exactly keep your presence a secret, boy. You met Mr. Lovegood on your first day there, and he saw no reason not to tell his wife. Your aunt Melissa has known for some time, however she's chosen not to act on it. I think she's too fond of the idea of subverting Lucius Malfoy's son to stop matters." Snape leaned back, unable to resist smirking just a little. "But back to you. You were saying you'd started to feel a liking for your cousin Marlene."

"Yeah." said Draco, more than a little deflated that his secret visits to the Lovegoods weren't that secret after all. "I was feeling bored last summer, suffering severe Manics withdrawal symptoms, so I decided to pay Marls a visit, knowing she was the one who hated me the least. The first few times, she got the house-elf to kick me out, but eventually I was able to worm my way in, and we got to know each other. And we hit it off really well! We did all sorts! You know, it was the best summer I've ever had?" Draco's previous low mood dissipated in the face of remembered enthusiasm. "I borrowed some of her brother's clothes, and we went out shopping. Marls would change some money for me at Gringotts, and away we'd go. We went shopping, sightseeing, the works. Most of the time, we just went to Exeter or Chudley, or just stayed at her place. She took me to London once, but we didn't stay long. Traffic fumes got to me, and there's so many people!" Draco shuddered at the thought. "I mean, I'll go again, sure, but it was one hell of a shock."

"I can imagine." murmured Snape soothingly, well remembering his first visit to London, as a pure-blood Northern country boy with very little experience of any towns whatsoever and a very sheltered upbringing. He'd not been much older than Draco was now, and despite Lily Evans's reassuring presence, had been more than a little overwhelmed by it all. Luckily, Caitlin had felt the same, so they'd retreated to one of the parks to get away from it all. "Here's a tip - get out of the West End as soon as possible. Ask Marlene to take you to one of the parks, or Primrose Hill. Then work up to Camden Lock and the South Bank. Then, and only then, should you brave Oxford Street, and under no circumstances should you venture there during the month of December. Camden Lock is also to be avoided at weekends."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." Draco's face fell. "That is, if I ever get to go there again. Marls won't talk to me, and I don't blame her. She virtually adopts me as a younger brother, and what do I do? Double-cross her not once but twice. Some friend I am."

Snape was regarding him extremely thoughtfully. "Hmm. Interesting. So why did you double-cross her then, if you regarded her as a friend?"

Draco shrugged. "Didn't have a lot of choice. She'd already been sacked as Seeker, and I'd spent most of the last year foolishly whining to Father about how it wasn't fair Potter had been picked for his team when I hadn't. So he went and bought seven Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones and gave them to the team on condition they took me on. Without telling me until the deal had been done. What was I supposed to do, turn round and say I didn't want it after all? He'd have hit the roof."

"I can well believe it." Snape agreed, knowing all too well what Lucius Malfoy was capable of, even towards his own son. "Go on."

"So I had to play along. Even when I didn't want to." Draco sighed. "And after a while, I started to believe it too. Started to believe the summer hadn't meant a thing and Marls was just my half-blood mutt cousin. But deep down, I knew it wasn't true. And it all came flooding back after Martin left. Marls slapped me in front of everyone and yelled at me. And I realised then what I'd done."

"But you must have known she wouldn't like you getting a friend of hers expelled." Snape interjected. "So why'd you do it?"

Draco shrugged. "Don't know. Peer pressure, I guess. Pansy, Crabbe, Goyle, they were hell bent on getting Tyler back, have been since day one. And I wasn't about to stand in their way. Besides, she's a Tal-y-Rhys and I wanted to get under her skin. So I went along with it. We couldn't do anything at first, but then she got found at the scene of the first attack, and then Pansy overheard her and Stormosi talking, and we had the idea she might be linked with the attacks in some way. Of course we still had nothing to go on. And then Weasley turned up with his little gift from the gods and it seemed too perfect to resist." Draco shook his head. "I am such a fool."

"*Boy, you can say that again!*" Corvus crowed.

"*Be quiet!*" Snape told the raven off, noting the look of suspicion Draco was giving the bird. "Well, Malfoy, at least you appear to have developed a conscience, which

wasn't something I ever thought I'd see in you. I can't stop you feeling guilty, nor can I mend your friendship with your cousin, although I hope for your sake it can be done. She's clearly a good influence on you."

"Thank you, sir." murmured Draco.

"No trouble, Malfoy." Snape gestured dismissively. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Not really, sir. I just wanted to know if there was anything else I can do."

"Probably not much. However you are on the right track, I believe. I heard about your little confrontation with the Clearwater twins."

"Oh that." Draco dismissed it. "It was nothing. I'm not having a couple of Ravenclaws passing judgement on us."

"Well, whatever your reasons, it was a very noble gesture..." he paused before allowing a smile to make the briefest of appearances, "and one that, politically speaking, couldn't have been faulted. Five points to Slytherin, Malfoy."

"I don't deserve them, you know." said Draco, smiling despite himself.

"You've never complained before." Snape observed.

"That was different." Draco got to his feet. "I'd better go. Better talk to Crabbe and Goyle about their Quidditch performance lately. Honestly, thrashed Ravenclaw reserves in the first match, and have barely won anything since. And please don't mention the Hufflepuff game." Draco shuddered. Despite the gifts of the Firebolts, Crabbe and Goyle had not improved their Quidditch performance in the slightest. In the end, thanks to Crabbe and Goyle failing to even try and protect their Chasers and Seeker, Hufflepuff had beaten them 240-nil. It had been a chilly Serpents' Nest that night.

"Ah yes, the Hufflepuff reserves game." Snape's eyes had taken on that cold luminosity that they always did when he was about to really lay into someone. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that. Draco Malfoy, if any Slytherin Quidditch team with one of your little crowd on it loses that badly again, I will personally make you wish you'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir." said Draco quickly. Snape might not be a big Quidditch fan, but no one cared about Slytherin's reputation more than he did.

"Excellent. Well, well, run along, Malfoy." Snape's anger had died away and now he just seemed bored. "Off you go, and don't get into any more trouble with Miss Tyler and friends. It's not generally considered a smart move."

"I won't." Draco promised. "You have my word."

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Crabbe and Goyle looked up as Draco re-entered their dorm. They didn't say a word. Draco did not appear to be in the best of moods, and when Draco was angry, you stayed quiet and kept a low profile. However, Crabbe couldn't contain himself for long. They'd both witnessed Draco demanding Deanna talk with him, and Luella's parting words had haunted them as well as their leader. They hadn't needed to be told that Draco must have been trying to sue for mercy with Luella's universally acknowledged deputy.

"Well?" asked Crabbe as Draco flung himself on to his bed.

"Well what?" snapped Draco.

"Well, how did your little chat with Tyler go? You're alive, so it obviously couldn't have gone too badly."

"Oh that." shrugged Draco. "Well, had to get that wretched prophecy of Martin's lifted somehow. We talked, and negotiations proved interesting."

"Yeah? What happened?" asked Goyle, wondering how it was that Draco was still alive and apparently unharmed.

"What did she do to you?" asked Crabbe, full of morbid curiosity.

"Surprisingly little, although I won't say she was exactly merciful. However, I have some good news - she's not seeking revenge."

This threw them. This was not Slytherin behaviour. Not Slytherin at all.

"Blimey, Malfoy, what did you have to do to get that?" Goyle asked, bewildered.

"Yeah," said Crabbe, "she's had her heart set on nothing else since Martin left. What have you promised her, the entire Malfoy inheritance?"

"Not exactly." Here, Draco fixed them both with a steely gaze that made both of them begin to wonder if perhaps it wasn't Malfoy who'd agreed to serve punishment.

"However, from this moment on, we are to stop fighting them. We don't have to befriend them, and to be honest, they'd rather we stayed well clear, but we are all to desist from acting maliciously against any of them. Got that boys?"

Crabbe and Goyle nodded. "OK."

"If that's what they want. After all, we've had revenge, I couldn't care less what they do." Crabbe looked at him curiously. "Is that it? Sounds a little lenient to me."

Draco just shrugged. "Tyler is not you. Apparently she's quite happy seeing us all tiptoeing around her in fear and submission. However, there is one thing, which I believe I mentioned before. Remember when you got the Firebolts?"

Goyle's expression changed into one of ecstatic bliss. "How could I forget?" he sighed.

Crabbe remained rather warier. "I remember. Go on."

"I remember telling you both to stop throwing games and start acting like proper Beaters."

Both of them had the grace to look ashamed.

"Oh. That."

"Sorry, boss."

"So you should be." Draco glared at them. "Well, it's not just Tyler who wants you to start behaving. Snape had a word with me too. He wasn't happy about that Hufflepuff game, lads. Not happy at all."

Both boys began to look ever shiftier. Draco continued.

"In fact, his exact words were that if a Slytherin team with you two on it ever lost that badly again, he'd make me wish I'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff."

Crabbe and Goyle both winced at this. Snape was obviously not going to take this lying down. Draco slipped off his bed and came to stand between them, an arm around each shoulder.

"Now, I'm not on the team and thus cannot control the match results. However, if Snape comes down hard on me as a result of anything you boys have done, I shall make damn sure that you two are dragged down with me. Understand?" His voice had gone ominously soft and his eyes were flicking dangerously from one to the other.

"Got it, Malfoy." croaked Crabbe, his throat hoarse with tension.

Goyle just nodded and whimpered. Draco got up and returned to his bed.

"Excellent. I trust we shall see better results next year, assuming Lovegood's not come to her senses and dropped you both." He began going through his trunk. "Now where is my quill, I have work to do, and let's face it, what with the last match of the year tomorrow, I'm not going to get much done then, am I?"

"It's just Gryffindor and Hufflepuff." said Goyle, confused. "What's the big deal about that?"

"Because, Goyle," Crabbe yawned, "Slytherin first team woefully underperformed this year which means our chances of winning hinge on the result. I blame that incompetent new Seeker myself. Bring back Lovegood, that's what I say."

"Shut up, Crabbe." snapped Draco. "That's rich anyway, coming from you, your family still maintain she should never have had the job in the first place."

Crabbe kept his face studiously neutral as he stared at the ceiling. "My family may not like it, but you can't deny it, the girl can play."

"But at least the first team didn't lose to Hufflepuff 240-nil." Draco pointed out.

This time, Crabbe turned to face him with an insolent grin. "And nor would we have done... if Goyle and I had played properly. A world of difference between being able to play and not trying, and trying but not being able to play."

"Well, next season, you'll be able to prove your point, won't you?" Draco retorted. "Until then, shut up!" He reached into his trunk again to find some parchment... and found his fingers encircling a small, leather-bound book. Intrigued, he lifted it out and inspected it. It was Ginny's diary.

"What's that you got there, Malfoy?" asked Crabbe, noticing the book in Draco's hand.

"It's that diary that Tyler took off Harry." said Draco dismissively.

Crabbe and Goyle both sat bolt upright at this.

"Yeah? Anything in it?" asked Goyle, springing off his bed and coming to look over Draco's shoulder.

Draco shook his head. "No. Blank. Totally blank. See for yourself."

Goyle flicked through it before flinging it back at Draco, disappointed. "Oh. How boring. I'd hoped for something interesting." He returned to his bed.

Crabbe was still watching the book. "So what are you going to do with it then?"

Draco shrugged. "Better give it back, I suppose. Tyler was most annoyed when she discovered it was gone. She may as well have it if she wants it that much, I've got no use for it."

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Draco was as good as his word. The following morning, he raced straight over to Deanna as she was about to leave the Serpents' Nest for breakfast.

"Tyler, wait!" he shouted, chasing after her. She didn't wait for him.

"I've got nothing to say to you." she snapped as he ran up to her.

"That's OK, I just wanted to..." he started, but Deanna cut him off, rounding on him with a fury terrible to behold.

"You just don't get it, do you, Malfoy?" she snapped at him. "I want nothing to do with you! At all! Ever! I want you to stay away from me, stay out of my life, and stop bothering me!"

"But Tyler, I just want to..." Draco began. She was having none of it.

"I mean it, Malfoy!" she fumed. "Leave me alone!" With that, she turned and stormed off. Draco watched her go, frustrated.

"I just wanted to give you your diary back." he said softly, holding the small black book in front of him. He swore under his breath. So now what? Rianne and Marlie were nowhere in sight, and he didn't fancy trying to find their dorm either. However, on turning around, he saw the answer to his problems.

Ginny Weasley had just walked in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Seizing his chance, he ran over to her.

"Ginny!" he smiled. "I've got something for you!"

"What?" she asked, still sleepy.

"This." he told her, and pushed the diary into her hands. Ginny seemed to wake up almost at once, staring at it in horror.

"No, I don't want it!" she cried, backing away.

"Well, nor do I." Draco said, rather irritated himself by now. "Take it, it's yours. No use to me, I never keep a diary. See you later, Gin." And before she could say another word, he was gone, leaving a horrified Ginny Weasley staring at the little black book in her hands.

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Chapter Twenty Five Another One Bites The Dust

It really was amazing what the prospect of first team Quidditch could accomplish. Marlie Lovegood was actually up, vertical, fully awake and dressed and at breakfast before Deanna Tyler. This was not a common event.

"Good gods." Deanna blinked. "You're up!" She looked at her watch. "Did I miss three hours or something?"

Marlie aimed a playful blow at her, which Deanna dodged with ease.

"No." she laughed. "But you'll miss the match if you don't hurry. Starts in fifteen minutes!"

Deanna looked at her watch again and shrieked. "Ack!" She turned to Marlie and Rianne. "Why didn't you two wake me up earlier? I'll never get a decent breakfast now! And who knows how long it could be until lunch??"

"Not long, if Harry's up to his usual standard." Rianne observed, causing Marlie to grimace. "Could be all over by noon."

"But we're hoping that won't happen, right?" Marlie chirped up. "Because we're hoping for a Hufflepuff win, right guys?"

The surrounding Slytherins unanimously failed to respond to her with anything but indifference. Marlie sagged, depressed at how bad the situation actually was.

"Dear gods, is this what it's come to? Having to support Hufflepuff to stand a chance at winning?" she sighed. "Slytherin, Slytherin, what's happened to you?"

"The decent Seeker got herself sacked and now her talentless rich brat cousin is going about merrily destroying any chance we might have had of winning?" suggested Rianne.

"Shut up." muttered Marlie. She turned to Deanna, who had transfigured her napkin into a paper plate and was even now piling it high with toast and croissants. "Tyler what are you doing?"

"Take-away breakfast." came the crisp reply. "Pass me those spare serviettes, Ri. Thank you." A wave of her wand later and a paper bag had appeared to go with the plate. Soon, Deanna was ready to go.

"Right. I'm sorted for food. Shall we get a move on?" She got to her feet. "I want to get some halfway decent seats."

"Us?" Rianne joined her. "We've been ready ages. We were just waiting for you." She gave Deanna a very pointed look before moving off towards the exit. Deanna turned to Marlie.

"You coming, Marls?"

"In a minute." Marlie took a last bite of toast. "I'm going to have a look for Ginny, see if her crowd want to watch the match with us. You go on ahead. Save me a seat."

"Will do. See you later." She headed off, leaving Marlie scanning the table for a sign of Ginny. She wasn't there, but Lydia and Autumn were chatting not far away. Marlie went over to them.

"Seen Ginny lately?" she asked.

"In the dorm still." Lydia replied. She was looking ever so slightly worried. "Marls, do you think she's OK?"

Marlie frowned. Earlier on in the year, she herself would have had doubts of her own, but just recently, Ginny had seemed perfectly normal.

"Seems fine to me. Why, is there something wrong?"

Lydia and Autumn exchanged worried glances.

"Maybe." said Autumn evasively. "But on the other hand, it could be nothing." she added, not wanting to worry Marlie unnecessarily.

"Nothing or not, if something's up with Ginny, I want to know about it." said Marlie firmly, trying to ignore the sudden burning sensation in her necklace and the voice of her dark twin whispering in her ear that Lydia and Autumn's suspicions were not unfounded. "What's up?"

"We think Malfoy might be bullying her." said Lydia softly.

"Yeah." Autumn nodded. "He was talking to her in the common room as we were coming to breakfast, but left as soon as we arrived. When we asked her what he wanted, she refused to tell us and said she had to go to the dorm, she wasn't well. She looked horrible too, really pale, shaking all over. I said what about the match, but she just glared at me and hissed that there were more important things than Quidditch." She shivered at the memory of just how her friend had seemed at that moment, totally alien and if she hadn't known better, practically malevolent, as if she'd been possessed by some loathsome demon.

"Then I asked if she was OK and if she wanted us to take her to the hospital wing, and she nearly bit my head off, saying she'd be fine if people just left her alone." said Lydia. "She looked really strange too, with this weird look in her eyes. In fact her eyes looked almost as if they were a different colour, green or blue or something, but it could just have been the light..." Her voice trailed off.

"The eyes might have been the light but that voice was real enough." Autumn shuddered. "Gods, but she sounded almost like a bloke, really harsh and nasty, and deeper than normal too. I swear, Marls, she looked possessed. I don't know if

Malfoy's done something or what, but she is not her normal self. We think you should have words - Malfoy likes you guys. He might listen to you."

Marlie fingered her necklace, the horrible nagging feeling at the back of her mind getting worse and worse by the second. And yet, despise her cousin as she did, the memory of the summer lingered on. He might be sarcastic, nasty and untrustworthy, but he wasn't the type to use Dark Magic on other students. Not his style at all. Unbidden, another thought came to her, of something else that inspired fear among all who laid eyes on it. Something that could be more than capable of ensnaring the unwary. Something that bore a marked resemblance to an object she'd seen Ginny scribbling in at the beginning of the year, a small, secret diary that Ginny had refused to let her anywhere near.

"Autumn," she began, "when you saw Ginny last, she wasn't carrying anything, was she?"

"Like what?" asked Autumn.

"Like, a small black book?" Marlie bit her lip, praying that she was wrong.

"I don't think so..." Autumn started, but Lydia cut her short.

"Oh yes she was. She had that little diary of hers in her hands. That's why I thought Malfoy might be bullying her, I wondered if he'd taken it and been blackmailing her, if he'd made her do something for him to earn it back." Lydia stopped, seeing Marlie's expression turn from concern to one of horror. "Marlie? What is it?"

"This diary of hers?" Marlie choked. "She's had it all year? And it's definitely a small black book?"

Lydia nodded. "Yeah. It's her secret diary. She's very possessive over it, used to write in it all the time, although I've not seen her use it lately. In fact, this morning is the first time I've seen her with it in ages, which is why I thought Malfoy might have taken it. Why, what's up?"

Marlie was by this time close to collapsing. Please, she prayed, please don't let this diary of Gin's be the one Deanna took off Harry, please. Only one way to find out.

"She's in the dorm, yes?"

"That's right." Autumn nodded.

"Right. I'm going to find her. You two run along to the match, stay together and don't go wandering off on your own, stay where there's people. Understand?"

The two first years nodded, confused.

"OK, but why?" asked Lydia.

Marlie shook her head. "No time to explain. I have to talk to Ginny and quickly. See you both later!" With that, she dashed off.

Autumn turned to Lydia "Do you reckon we did the right thing, telling her all that? She looked awfully worried."

Lydia nodded. "Gods, yeah. If Marls is that worried, then something must be up, and we could hardly let Ginny deal with it on her own."

Autumn didn't seem convinced. "I don't know. I'm worried about Marlie now too. Do you think she'll be able to manage it?"

"Course she will. She has Tyler on her side." Lydia took Autumn by the arm. "Come on. Let's go. The match'll be kicking off soon." The two first years left the room.

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Marlie raced across the Great Hall, panic beginning to well and truly set in. A memory of February came back to her, of Luella also saying she had to talk to Ginny and racing off. Had she realised the truth as well? Maybe, maybe not. If she'd guessed the whole truth, she'd have certainly told them, or said something to Snape. Not even finding Penelope Clearwater petrified would have made her forget that in a hurry, surely? But she must have guessed something. Marlie was ready to kick herself. If only the whole expulsion thing hadn't got in the way, Lu might have been able to get the truth out of Ginny and sort the whole thing out. For Ginny must surely have been the diary thief. She knew how Deanna's locking charms worked, she knew which tunes they used to lock the dorm up with, she'd known they had the diary, she could easily have eavesdropped on them. Marlie would have been ready to kill her, had she not been terrified for the poor girl. She'd had Voldemort's diary with her all year, been writing in it, pouring out her soul to gods knew what all that time? Marlie remembered one of her mother's sayings, that if you stared into the abyss long enough, the abyss started staring back into you. She'd always wondered what it meant, and now she knew. Voldemort must have been using her for who knew how long to cause the attacks. Since Halloween at least. Marlie shuddered to think what Ginny must have been going through. Must have made Sleeping Death look like a child's tea party. At least with Sleeping Death, you knew what you were up against. With a Sleeping Death trance, you had the advantage of knowing that at least the demons you met were your own.

She skidded to a halt as she heard voices up ahead, immediately recognising Hermione as one of them.

"Harry - I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

This was followed by the sound of someone racing upstairs, presumably Hermione on her way to the library. Marlie emerged into the Entrance Hall proper to see Harry standing there, looking up the stairs in confusion.

"Where's she off to?" Marlie asked.

"The library." said Harry, distracted. "She thinks she might know something about what was causing the attacks."

This got Marlie's attention straight away. Maybe Ginny could wait. If Hermione was on to something too, maybe it was time they teamed up.

"Yeah? Like what?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know." He lowered his voice. "Listen, Marls, can I tell you something?"

"Go on." Marlie nodded.

"OK then. I could hear this voice in the walls, wanting to kill something. It's not the first time I've heard it either. And last time I heard it, well..." here he paused for breath. "Last time I heard it there was an attack. And that's what inspired Hermione. See, only I can hear it, no one else can. She seems to think that's important."

Marlie just gazed at him in mounting horror. Oh my god, the monster's on the loose now... And then another thought, one uncharacteristically selfless for someone as Slytherin as Marlie.

"And you just let her go, did you?"

"Well yeah." said Harry. "No sense stopping her when she gets one of her ideas - besides, when she's on to something, she's usually right."

"I see." said Marlie levelly. "So, you just let your best mate go running off on her own, did you? While there's the possibility of a crazed Heir of Slytherin and an incredibly dangerous monster roaming the school. Your *Muggle-born* best mate?"

She watched as Harry went pale, the implications dawning on him. "Oh my god, *Hermione!*" he yelled, turning to run after her. Marlie grabbed his arm.

"Harry, wait! You've got a Quidditch match about to start." For the briefest of moments, Marlie toyed with the idea of taking him with her, causing him to miss the match and forcing Gryffindor to default, but her ethical self, in astonishingly top form today, overruled her. Besides, if Slytherin lost, all the more reason for them to beg her to return... "You go, get yourself out there. I'll look for Hermione."

"But you're half-blood, you're not safe either." Harry whispered. Marlie cut him off.

"One mage parent is better than none." She drew her wand. "And you're talking to someone who can beat Deanna Tyler in a fight. I'll be alright. Don't worry." And with that, she raced off towards the library.

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Marlie arrived at the library just as Hermione was dashing out, a piece of paper clutched in her hand and an exhilarated look on her face.

"Marlie, I've found it!" she breathed. "I know how they're doing the attacks!"

Marlie just nodded grimly. "Yeah. And I know who. But what the hell are you doing up here on your own? If Harry heard that voice again, that means the attacker's probably on the loose right now! Hermione, do you have **any** concern for your own safety?"

"Doesn't matter!" Hermione grinned. "I know how to get past the monster! Take a look at this!" She thrust the parchment in her hand at Marlie.

Marlie scanned it, feeling her heart shoot up into her throat and the bottom fall out of her stomach, now mortally afraid. It was a page from *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*. And the monster it described was none other than the Basilisk.

"Oh my god." whispered Marlie. "A Basilisk? Are you sure?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course. That's why Harry can hear it, and no one else can - he's a Parselmouth. It kills by looking at people, but no one's died because no one's looked it in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera, Mrs. Norris saw it reflected in the water on the floor, Justin saw it through Nearly Headless Nick - Nick got the full blast but he couldn't die *again* - but I don't know how to account for Penelope yet."

"Glasses." Marlie whispered. "She was cleaning her glasses at the time, must have seen it in the lenses." She shut her eyes, remembering the climax of her Sleeping Death trance, being chased around an underground vault by a Basilisk controlled by Voldemort. A vault which she realised must have been the Chamber of Secrets. She could have slapped herself for being so blind - deep down, she'd known all along. She never thought it would happen in real life though. That time, it had just been a dream. The Basilisk had bitten Deanna, but she'd survived thanks to Snape and Caitlin pulling her back to her own body. There'd be no such escape route this time. She grabbed Hermione by the wrist.

"Come on." she breathed. "We have to get out of here, and fast! It could be anywhere."

"OK." said Hermione. "But we'll be fine, I know how stay out of trouble. Got a mirror?"

"Of course I've got a mirror." Marlie snapped as she fished in her bag for the little hand mirror she always carried for hair and make-up emergencies. "Here."

"Keep it." Hermione told her. "You need to use it to see around corners before you turn them, so you can tell if the Heir's there or not." Something occurred to her. "Did you say you knew who it was?"

"Yeah." Marlie nodded. "Remember Riddle's diary?"

"Of course." Hermione replied. "It told us it was Hagrid."

"Do you believe that?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so, I mean I know he's fond of monsters, but he's not the type to keep something that was attacking students. Is it him?"

"Of course not!" snapped Marlie. "Hermione, that diary is not what it seems. Don't believe it, don't trust it, don't have anything to do with it unless you have to. Why do you think Deanna took it off Harry? She knows who Riddle really is."

"Who is he?" asked Hermione, curious and yet beginning to look just a little anxious.

"Voldemort." said Marlie quietly and watched in satisfaction as Hermione went pale and clapped her hands to her face.

"You-Know-Who, oh my god!" she gasped. "You mean... that diary... is causing the attacks?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah. It fell into the hands of someone who didn't know what it was, and it took them over, used them to open the Chamber. The school was safe while we had it, but it got stolen from our dorm, and now the one who had it first has it back. Which means we've got to get out of here."

Hermione was still trying to take it all in. "But who...?" she whispered. "Who is it?"

Marlie was about to respond when a sudden flash of red caught her eye. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to see a small, black-clad, red-haired figure standing in the corridor just ahead of them.

"Ginny."

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Hermione turned round and smiled to see Ginny standing there. "Ginny! There you are! Ron didn't see you at breakfast, he was getting worried. Come on, we have to get moving, the Heir of Slytherin's loose and could attack at any moment."

Ginny stood there, unmoving, with a rather cryptic smile on her face.

"Yes." she said. "I know."

"So, we'd better go then." said Hermione, just a little worried by Ginny's apparent calmness. "In case the monster turns up."

"It won't." said Ginny, still with that same deathly certainty. "Not unless it's called."

Hermione may not have been the most sensitive girl in the school, but she had no trouble working out that something was wrong.

"Ginny? What's up?" she started to ask, but a touch on her arm from Marlie stopped her.

"Hermione," said Marlie softly, "when I said her name just now, I wasn't addressing her. I was answering your previous question."

Hermione gasped in shock, realising in a flash what Marlie meant. Marlie, meanwhile, turned to meet Ginny's eyes, steeling herself for what needed to be said.

"Ginny." she smiled, doing her best to hide her nervousness. "It's alright. You can trust us."

"Trust you?" This time, Ginny laughed, a cold, hard laugh that really didn't suit her. "Yes, you are both so very trustworthy, aren't you? Trustworthy, reliable, oh-so predictable." She shook her head. "You know, Marlene, you really didn't need to die. If you'd just acted like a proper Slytherin and let Harry come after Miss Granger here, you could have avoided all this. Ah well. Too late now. You always did have this strange ethical streak - must have inherited it from that filthy Muggle father of yours."

Marlie's face twisted into a snarl, but she controlled herself. "Riddle, let her go. Let her go now, and we'll say no more about it."

The malevolent force that had taken over Ginny Weasley burst out laughing at this.

"And what are you going to do about it, half-blood? Last time you faced my little pet, you fled stumbling from it, you and your allegedly mighty warrior friend the Tal-y-Rhys Heiress Deanna."

"What's he talking about, Marlie?" Hermione whispered.

Marlie just faced the possessed Ginny, lifting her necklace with the fingers of her left hand. "A dream I once had." She took a step forward. "I was only twelve and I still defeated you. I say to you now, you will not find me an easy target. Now. Let... her... go!" She stepped right up to Ginny, thrusting the necklace in her face.

Ginny/Riddle hissed in fury, backing away. "You..." she snarled. "Well, it won't help you! Look behind you!"

Marlie dropped the necklace, and turned, but was stopped by Hermione.

"No!" she cried. "He's trying to trick you. Use the mirror!"

Marlie nodded, and flipped out the mirror, holding it up so she could see the corridor behind her. Hermione peered over her shoulder as they both looked into the small hand-mirror. And saw...

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Back at the Quidditch pitch, the atmosphere was veritably buzzing in anticipation. The Gryffindors were practically jubilant. The Slytherins looked on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The Hufflepuffs looked almost pained with the agony of wanting to win and yet knowing that a win for them would give the trophy to Slytherin. Even

the Ravenclaws looked interested. It looked like it was going to be a good match for all concerned.

Rianne and Deanna were taking their seats towards the back, with an unrivalled view of the action. It was a strange but bizarre phenomenon that no matter how many Slytherins turned out for any given Quidditch match, there were always enough seats with a decent view when Deanna and her friends wanted to sit somewhere.

But before they could sit down, they were approached by Ron.

"I say, you two haven't seen Ginny have you?" he asked nervously.

Both girls shook their heads. "Haven't seen her all morning." Rianne told him.

Ron bit his lip. "No. Nor have I. She just said she'd watch the match with me if I liked, and she's usually on time. I was starting to worry about her, that's all."

"Marlie said she was going to look for her." Deanna volunteered. "I wouldn't worry, Ron, Marls'll find her. And you know what she's like with timekeeping. They'll probably roll up eventually."

"I hope so." said Ron quietly. "I just don't like the idea of her off on her own, not when the school's like this."

Deanna opened her mouth to say that there might not have been any danger if he hadn't got Luella expelled, but Rianne guessed what she was thinking and nudged her sharply to keep quiet.

"Well, I'm sure she'll turn up." Rianne reassured him. "Marlie'll look after her, I'm sure."

"Hope so. Well, I'd better get back to the Gryffindor end. This lot look about ready to lynch me." He indicated some nearby Slytherins, all of whom were glaring at him. "See you later."

Ron had only just gone, and Rianne and Deanna had only just taken their seats, when Lydia and Autumn turned up.

"No Ginny?" asked Rianne, raising an eyebrow. The three first years were normally inseparable.

Lydia shook her head, troubled. "No. She wasn't well. Listen, Deanna, can I ask you something?"

"What?" asked Deanna, watching as the two first years sat next to her.

"It's about Ginny..." Lydia began.

"And Malfoy." Autumn added.

"What about them?" snapped Deanna. "I don't like the way you linked their names there."

"They're not an item are they?" Rianne asked, trying not to grin.

Both girls shook their heads.

"Oh no."

"Nothing like that."

"Just we think, well." Lydia took a deep breath. "We think he might be picking on her."

"Is he now." Deanna gripped her wand, her eyes automatically shifting to Draco, sitting a few rows ahead of them. "We'll see about that."

"Of course, it's only a suspicion." said Lydia hastily.

"Yeah, we're not entirely certain." added Autumn. "So, er, don't go running after him or anything, because we might be wrong."

Deanna put her wand away, turning to Rianne. "Well? What do you think?"

Rianne was frowning, looking rather puzzled. "Malfoy? Picking on Ginny? Well, he could be, but..." She shook her head. "Doesn't make sense. If anything, Malfoy's been keeping a very low profile of late, he's not been swaggering around like he usually does. And Ginny's seemed completely happy and at ease. She doesn't seem like she's being picked on."

"Well, we didn't think she was either." said Lydia. "We just saw them talking this morning, that's all, and Ginny seemed out of sorts afterwards."

Deanna nodded. "Hmm. Tell you what, we'll all keep an eye on them both and if anything untoward happens, we'll step in and have a word. OK?"

Lydia and Autumn agreed, relieved that they had help in dealing with Ginny's recent weirdness. However, they didn't have a chance to say anything else. They were all distracted by the sight of Professor McGonagall striding on to the pitch, megaphone in hand.

"This match has been cancelled."

Rianne and Deanna looked at each other.

"Cancelled? What's she on about, cancelled? It can't be!" Deanna stared in disbelief.

"Marlie's not going to like this." said Rianne. She looked around. "Say, where is Marlie anyway?"

Deanna looked around. No Marlie. She turned to Lydia.

"Have you seen Marlie? She hardly ever misses Quidditch."

"Yeah, she was heading back to the dorm to find Ginny. But she surely must be on her way back by now." said Lydia, frowning.

Deanna turned back to Rianne.

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all. Rianne?"

Rianne was biting her lip, suddenly looking unaccountably worried.

"I think," she said deliberately, "that we had better go and talk to Professor Snape. McGonagall of all people does not cancel Quidditch matches without a very good reason, not when Gryffindor need to win to get the trophy." She got up. "Come on."

Lydia and Autumn got up to follow them, but Rianne stopped them.

"Not you. You two stay here, I've a feeling this could be dangerous. Stay with the crowd, OK?"

The two first years sulked but did as they were told. They knew enough not to argue with Rianne Stormosi.

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The two girls fought their way through the ranks of muttering students, trying to make their way towards Professor Snape, who had just strode out to talk to Professor McGonagall. Oddly enough, the Slytherins didn't seem too bothered, and a few were even jubilant.

"Look at it this way," Rianne heard her sister's voice saying excitedly, "if the match is cancelled, that means the tournament's off, right? Which means we get to keep the Quidditch Cup!"

"I'd rather have won it properly." Mike Lovegood was heard muttering.

"Yeah, but at least we didn't lose!" Kat urged.

Rianne didn't catch any more of the conversation. She was too busy trying to keep up with Deanna, who was forcing her way through the crowds, determined to get an explanation. Professor McGonagall had just given out another announcement to the effect that all students were to return to their common rooms where the Heads of Houses would instruct them. This was getting worse by the second.

Snape was engaged in a hushed, tense conversation with the Gryffindor House Head. He seemed as stunned as the rest of them.

"Not one of mine, Minerva, it can't be!" he was protesting.

"I'm sorry, Severus." she replied gently. "But there's no doubt." McGonagall shook her head, deeply grieved. "The poor, poor girl and after all that business in her first year too."

Snape was hanging his head. "Her mother isn't going to like this. Still, at least we are certain of reviving her this time."

Reviving? Business in the first year? A Slytherin girl? Rianne looked around and realised with a jolt which Slytherin girl was nowhere in sight... and a half-blood too. Oh gods...

Deanna had by this time reached Snape.

"Sir, what's going on?" she demanded. "Why's the match off?"

Snape turned to her, and the look in his eyes did nothing to allay Rianne's fears. He was gazing tenderly at her, his usual coldness gone.

"Deanna." he said softly. "I think you'd better come with me. You too, Miss Stormosi. There's been another attack."

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They followed him in silence through the deserted school. Snape, confirming Rianne's worst fears, had asked Mike Lovegood to come along too. Oddly enough though, Professor McGonagall was there too, with Harry Potter, still in his Quidditch robes, and Ron Weasley behind her. Rianne couldn't even begin to work out what they were doing there, unless... A horrible thought occurred to her, that maybe Marlie wasn't the only victim, that maybe another unaccounted-for Slytherin had been attacked as well. But if that was so and Ginny was Petrified too, why had Harry been invited along, and not the twins or Percy?

At length they arrived at the hospital wing. Snape opened the door to reveal two frozen figures lying on beds. One was Hermione Granger, who Harry and Ron immediately rushed over to, Ron stunned that this had happened to his friend, Harry burying his head in his hands, seemingly overcome.

There was no mistaking the other though. For Rianne and Deanna, this was a sight that was all too familiar. Stretched out on the bed next to Hermione, blonde hair cascading around her, was the prone form of Marlie Lovegood.

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"Marls!" Deanna yelled, rushing over to her friend. She knelt by the bed, staring numbly at the fallen Slytherin, unable to believe that this had happened to a friend of hers. Rianne joined her, placing an arm around her shoulders, silence saying more than words ever could.

Whereas Mike Lovegood came and stood on the other side, leaning over his sister with a strangely emotionless look on his face. Without a word, he stroked her hair.

"Not again, Marls!" he murmured softly, before turning to Professor Snape. "You will be able to revive her, won't you?"

Snape nodded. "Oh, of course. As soon as those Mandrakes are ready, I can have the potion brewed within days. She'll be fine."

Mike nodded, reassured. "That's all I wanted to know. Thank you, sir." Kneeling down, he turned his attention to Deanna, watching her unblinkingly until she had no option but to acknowledge his presence.

"What?" she snapped at him.

"Well?" was all he said.

"Well what?"

"Last time, you were the one to avenge her. Going to repeat yourself?" Still that unmoving gaze.

Deanna shifted uneasily, rattled by the assumption that it was her job to do something about it, still in shock, and further struck by how impossible the task seemed.

"Maybe. Maybe not. What you are forgetting, Mike Lovegood, is that last time, I actually had the faintest idea who it was! This time I have no idea. It really could be anyone."

"That so?" Mike didn't seem to believe her. "Well, whether that's true or not, you guys seem to know more than the rest of us. I refuse to believe you don't have any leads." He got up. "I'll leave it with you. See you later, Deanna. You too, Rianne." He moved away, leaving Deanna and Rianne alone with their feelings.

"You little fool, Marlie." Deanna whispered. "Why didn't you come to the match with us? What were you thinking of?"

Rianne tried to comfort her. "Don't blame her, Deanna. There's not been any attacks since Lu left, she probably thought she was safe."

"Suppose." sighed Deanna, who had to admit she'd not been walking around the school in fear of an attack either lately. She turned to Snape. "Where did they find her? In the Slytherin Corridor, I suppose."

Snape shook his head. "Actually, no. The two girls were found together, just outside the library."

"The library??" Both girls stared in disbelief.

"What, Marlie?" asked Deanna.

"Near the library?" said Rianne, wondering if she'd heard him right.

"When there's a Quidditch match on?" And there Deanna had thought this morning couldn't have got any stranger.

Snape nodded. "Oh yes. Virtually right outside it. And another thing. I don't suppose either of you know anything about this?" He produced a small, round, silver object which Deanna had no trouble recognising.

"Marlie's little handmirror. She's always got it with her. Must have fallen out of her bag."

"Indeed." said Snape dryly. "However, that fails to explain why Miss Lovegood was clutching it as if her life depended on it."

Maybe it did, the thought came to Rianne. She turned back to face Marlie. And realised something else.

From time to time, Sight actually came in useful. A moment later, and Rianne had seen the faces of the other victims, as if she'd been first on the scene. Creevey, Finch-Fletchley, and a half-remembered view of Penny Clearwater vividly brought to life. Three faces, each frozen in a rictus of terror. But not Marlie's. Marlie's by contrast spoke not of fear, but rather a cool, controlled anger and a determination to see this through. Almost as if she'd known...

"You knew." Rianne whispered, half to herself. "You knew what you were about to face." Again, she had to wonder about that mirror. Had Marlie used it in an attempt to defend herself? She looked over at Hermione. She didn't look frightened either. More... curious.

Rianne went over all this in her mind. Near the library. Found together. Hermione was certainly smart enough to have worked out what the monster could be, could have just worked it out after looking something up, have run out of the library, met Marlie and told her what she'd discovered. But why was Marlie there at all? It didn't make sense, Lydia had said she'd been looking for Ginny. Unless she hadn't found Ginny in the dorm and gone to the library instead looking for her.

She tugged at Deanna's sleeve. "We really have to talk." she murmured in her ear.

Deanna nodded. "Agreed. But just one thing." She reached out to Marlie's neck and unfastened the clasp on her necklace. "I'm not leaving this up here where anyone could get at it." She put the necklace around her own neck before hunting around for the rest of Marlie's stuff.

"I'll escort you back to the common room then." said Snape.

"In a minute." Deanna looked over to where Harry and Ron were both staring at Hermione. "There's something else I need to do first."

Unlike the Slytherins, Harry and Ron hadn't been thinking of revenge, or calculating how the attack had happened, but what had passed between them had been no less significant.

Harry had raced to Hermione's side, head in his hands.

"Hermione, no!" he'd groaned, mentally kicking himself. "Not you, not you, please!"

Ron had come up behind him and patted his shoulder, trying to comfort his friend.

"Harry, don't." Ron whispered. "It's alright. She'll be OK. She's not dead, they can revive her."

Harry shook his head, a lump in his throat. "No it's not!" he whispered, trying to hold back tears. "Ron, I heard that voice again! And... and I let her go off on her own! My Muggle-born friend, on her own with the Heir of Slytherin loose! Marlie told me I was a fool, and she was right! In fact, I'm a fool twice over, for letting Hermione go, and for letting a half-blood go after her! Should have been me there, not those two. It should have been me!" He pounded the bed in a mixture of grief and fury at himself.

"Wasn't your fault, Harry!" Ron whispered desperately. "You know what Hermione's like, when she gets an idea in her head there's no stopping her. And you try arguing with Lovegood. Not going to happen. Anyway, it's not your fault." Here, he too lowered his eyes. "It's mine."

"Eh?" Harry looked up sharply.

"It's my fault." said Ron simply. "For getting Luella expelled. If she'd been here, maybe she could have prevented this. Maybe she'd have caught the real Heir by now. She certainly would have had reason, they'd already got her cousin."

"Maybe. Or maybe not." There was very little warmth in Harry's voice, but none of the recent hostility either. Now he just seemed too drained to care. "Guess we'll never know. She's not here, no changing that now. Either way, I knew she wasn't here, so even more reason not to let Muggle-borns and half-bloods off on their own." He shook his head. "Let's face it, we're both idiots."

"At least you're not a petty and malicious idiot." said Ron softly.

"Even you've got your good points." Harry got to his feet, and looked Ron in the eye. While he didn't seem to be forgiven yet, nevertheless there was a definite change there, as if Harry was too drained to keep fighting. "Come on. Let's get going."

They were interrupted by the approach of Deanna Tyler.

"Hey, Tyler." Harry managed a weak smile.

"Tyler." Ron nodded. He remembered their last close encounter all too well, and felt his body tensing in fear of a repeat. But there was no hostility in the Slytherin now.

"Harry. Ron." Deanna was regarding them both surprisingly tenderly. "How are you both?"

"I've felt better." said Harry quietly.

"We'll get by." said Ron.

"Good, good." Deanna paused. "I just wanted to say sorry about Hermione." She shot a look back at Marlie before turning back to them. "I know how you feel."

"Thanks." whispered Harry, fighting the urge to burst into tears. Something in the Slytherin's gentle condolence and shared hurt touched him to the core. He composed himself. "I'm sorry about Marlie. I spoke to her before the attack, she told me I was nuts for letting Hermione go running off like that, and went after her. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't have it, reckoned she'd manage."

"Sounds like Marls." sighed Deanna. "Hermione too come to think of it. Don't blame yourself, Harry. Marlie's like an unstoppable force of nature sometimes. You could no more have prevented this than stopped a tsunami. In fact, you might have had more luck with the tsunami. Listen, they'll be OK." She reached out and took Harry by the shoulder. "They'll be revived soon. And when they are," here a cruel, cold look came into her eyes, "I'm going to find out who was responsible and teach them not to mess with Slytherins."

Ron shuddered at this. He knew all too well what Deanna was capable of. And yet, now it was directed at whoever had done this to Hermione, he found himself rather appreciating her way of dealing with enemies.

"Tyler," he began.

She turned to look at him, the icy anger in her eyes abating only slightly.

"What?"

"When you give the Heir of Slytherin a complete pasting..."

"Yes?"

"Can I give you a hand?"

She regarded him coolly for a few moments, evidently considering it. Then the coldness seemed to disappear as she began to smile just a little too widely.

"Sure. More the merrier. Come right along and join in the fun." She resumed the grieving friend demeanour. "Anyhow, I'd better leave you guys to it. Take care. See you later." She turned and rejoined her friends, before being led away by Professor Snape. Professor McGonagall approached the two boys.

"Come. I'll escort you back to Gryffindor Tower. I need to address the students in any case."

Harry and Ron assented without a word and let Professor McGonagall lead them away.

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The rest of Slytherin House were no less shocked by the news.

"A Slytherin?" gasped Pansy Parkinson. "But... it can't be, the attacker's the Heir of Slytherin, they wouldn't attack one of us, surely!"

"Be that as it may." Each word of Professor Snape's fell from his lips like meltwater from an icicle, and had much the same psychological effects on the stunned Slytherins. "There has been another attack and one of our number was a victim."

At this, everyone began looking around, doing a mental roll-call and trying to figure out who it had been. It wasn't long before some of them realised just who it was. And Draco Malfoy was one of the first. Crabbe and Goyle of course hadn't left his side all morning, and Pansy wasn't easy to miss. Nor was Ginny, red hair standing out against the grey slabs of rock that formed the common room walls that all the Salvador Dali posters in the world couldn't make any less cell-like. Deanna and Rianne were there, keeping themselves to themselves, eyes downcast, looking like mourners. And then he looked for his cousin, expecting to see her alongside them... and didn't find her.

He looked up and locked eyes with his Head of House. "Sir... it's not... please tell me... It's not my cousin is it?"

Snape lowered his eyes, sadness confirming Draco's worst suspicions. "I'm sorry, Malfoy. It is indeed your cousin Miss Lovegood. She was found Petrified outside the library with the Gryffindor second year Hermione Granger."

Draco sank back in his chair, unprepared for the intensity of his reaction. *The Heir of Slytherin petrified my cousin! Bastard!* Then anger was followed by a rather different emotion, as it started to sink in that the self-titled Slytherin Sex Kitten, Provider of Pyrotechnics, Mistress of the Music Centre, his cousin, Marlie Lovegood, wasn't going to be around for a very long time. He screwed his eyes up in a mixture of rage, hate, pain and despairing impotence that the only son and heir of Lucius Malfoy could not have prevented this.

So it was that he only dimly heard Snape informing them that a six o'clock curfew was now in operation, that no one was to leave the common room without being accompanied by a teacher, and that all evening activities, including Quidditch, had been cancelled, before looking meaningfully at all of them and requesting that if any of them knew anything about who was causing the attacks, they should come forward. This last statement was accompanied by a particularly intense look at Deanna and Rianne, neither of whom met his eyes. Draco was too stricken to notice this but almost everyone else in the common room did. Including a rather intrigued Pansy.

So it was that when Snape had gone, she looked at Draco, now staring at his feet in sorrow and sheer, wretched despair, before turning to look at Rianne and Deanna, calm despite their evident sadness, then back to Draco again, and came to a decision. Beckoning Crabbe and Goyle over, she got to her feet.

"What are we doing, Pansy?" Goyle whispered.

"We're going to have words with the bereaved." came the response. "Draco's upset. I hate seeing Draco upset. Come on, boys."

Deanna, unable to rid herself of the memory of Marlie lying there so still and helpless, and also remembering an earlier memory of Marlie in the hospital wing, crying out and sobbing in a demented feverish sleep from which there could be no awakening, didn't hear the approaching footsteps. Nor did she see them immediately, absorbed as she was in holding Marlie's Snitch necklace in her hands, silently asking it why, as if it could give her any answers.

However, what she couldn't miss was the shadow that suddenly loomed over her, blotting out the fire light, extinguishing the gleam that seemed to light the Snitch from within. Slowly, she raised her eyes. And saw Pansy Parkinson standing there with her arms folded, Crabbe and Goyle flanking her.

Rianne had also noticed their arrival and was regarding them with mild suspicion.

"Shouldn't it be Malfoy in that particular pose?" she drawled lazily.

Pansy's eyes flashed fire at her. "Should be, yes. However, right now, he's not really in the mood." She unfolded her arms and planted both hands firmly on the table that Deanna and Rianne were sitting at. "Draco Malfoy is not happy. Not happy at all."

Deanna returned her attention to Marlie's necklace. "Pansy, go tell it to someone who cares."

"You will care. Believe me, you will." Pansy said softly, eyes flicking from one to the other. "For some reason that I can't work out for the life of me, he was actually rather fond of that cousin of his. He's not taking this very well. In fact, I'd go so far as to say he was miserable."

"Devastated." said Crabbe, now standing behind Deanna's shoulder, glaring at her.

"Depressed, even." Goyle threw in for good measure, positioning himself behind Rianne.

"And when Draco Malfoy's miserable, what happens, boys?" Pansy trilled, sliding into a nearby chair.

"All his friends get miserable too!" Crabbe and Goyle chorused.

"Exactly!" smiled Pansy. The skin-deep smile faded as soon as it had appeared. "To put it bluntly, Draco Malfoy is going to be a complete pain in the arse until she's back. And we want to know what you're going to do about it."

"What we're going to do about it?" Deanna raised an eyebrow, exchanging glances with Rianne. "And why is it our fault all of a sudden?"

"Don't play the innocent with me!" Pansy hissed, lowering her voice. "I saw the way Snape was looking at you two. You know far more than you're letting on about the

whole business, admit it! Your friend Luella didn't get expelled for no reason, did she? She knew more than she let on, and she must have let you in on the deal! So do something about it!"

"Do something about it, she says." Deanna leaned forward, her face mere inches from Pansy's, and her eyes now flashing with anger in their turn. The mention of Luella's name had that effect. "Lu didn't get expelled for no reason, she says. And we all know what that reason was, don't we? Because certain individuals decided it might be *fun* to frame her for something she didn't do! Didn't they?"

Pansy had the decency to look away at this, blushing furiously. Deanna continued remorselessly.

"And had those individuals not framed her, she'd still be here, wouldn't she. And *if* she'd still been here, there might not have been an attack. Mightn't there?"

Pansy had to admit that this was so.

"I admit we might have been a little hasty in getting rid of a possible Second Heir."

"So why'd you do it then?" Deanna was not letting this issue go in a hurry.

Pansy squirmed in her chair, well and truly on the spot. "We didn't think."

"There's a revelation for you." Rianne remarked. "Half-crazy and incredibly evil resurrected First Heir roaming the school letting a great, big, fanged thing loose on students, and this lot decide to get rid of possibly the one person who can stop them, and they say they didn't think. There's a shocker."

Crabbe spoke up, his voice unnaturally subdued. "What she means is, we didn't think they'd go for one of us."

"House loyalty and all that." Goyle added.

"Same house loyalty you showed so well when you got Luella kicked out?" said Rianne. The other Slytherins didn't answer. It was Deanna who took up the conversation.

"Well, you three can stop worrying. Don't worry, we're going to find out who did this and deal with them. But not for your sakes or that of your precious Draco." She sat back, glaring coldly at them. "We're doing this for Marls. Because she's our friend. And for Lu, because we need to clear her name too. And because we don't want any more attacks. For no other reason." She indicated with a flick of the head that this conversation was over. "Now go away."

Pansy didn't reply. Instead, she just got up and slinked off, Crabbe and Goyle following her. Deanna turned to Rianne.

"First Mike, then Snape, now her. Why does the whole of Slytherin House seem to think it's our job to do something about this?"

"Maybe because it is." Rianne got to her feet. "All year we've just been sitting here, watching all this unfold, not intervening, not doing anything, even when we had the Second Heir sitting right here next to us. We just let You-Know-Who carry on terrorising everyone and we did nothing. And now look what's happened. The fight's come right to our front door, and now we've lost Marls too. Well, no more." She indicated for Deanna to get up and follow her. "Come with me. We seriously need to talk."

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"So what did you have in mind?" Deanna asked as she sank onto her bed, watching Rianne pace up and down the dorm.

"She knew." came the crisp response. "Marlie knew what she was up against. Did you see her face? She wasn't scared. She was facing the Heir like a warrior. She knew who it was, she knew what that monster was too, I don't doubt. And Hermione, she wasn't scared either. Curious more than scared."

"Typical Gryffindor." remarked Deanna. "But how did Marls know? I mean, she'd have told us if she knew, surely?"

"That's what bothers me." frowned Rianne, flinging herself into a chair. "I mean, I'm sure she had no more idea than the rest of us this morning. And yet something happened, she found something out, and worked out what was going on."

"And got attacked. Wonderful timing you have there, Marls." sighed Deanna. Something else occurred to her. "Why was she near the library anyway? Doesn't make sense, she hardly ever goes there."

"Well, if she was looking for Ginny, she might have decided to try it." Rianne mused. "And didn't Harry say he'd run into Marlie, who'd yelled at him for letting Hermione go running off? If she'd met him before going to the common room, she might have changed her mind about Ginny and gone after Hermione instead. Went straight to the library, ran into Hermione and got attacked."

"While clutching a mirror." Deanna finished. "This just gets weirder, Ri."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Rianne said thoughtfully. "Maybe not if Hermione had been doing some research of her own. Maybe she'd worked it out and told Marlie. I'm sure that mirror's significant too, I think it was being used to ward off an attack somehow."

"Worked well there, didn't it?" Deanna remarked. "Honestly, Ri, what were they thinking of? Was the monster so hideously ugly they thought it'd drop dead at the sight of its own reflection?"

Rianne laughed at that. "It'd have to be pretty damned ugly for the mere sight of it to kill someone. We're talking Medusa-ugly here." She stopped smiling. Medusa, who could kill with a single look, and had snakes for hair, believed to be merely a legend, but a legend with some basis in fact. Because there was one monster who could indeed kill with a mere glance.

"Athene help us, Tyler, it's a sodding Basilisk."

"What?!" Deanna screamed, sitting bolt upright. "A Basilisk?? Ri, please. Tell me you're joking, please."

Rianne shook her head slowly. "I'm not. Think about it, why else would they need a mirror? So they could see round corners and not walk straight into it. That's why they're not dead, only Petrified, because they didn't see it directly. The mirror diluted the power."

"Which means all the others must have seen a reflection of it too." said Deanna. She snapped her fingers. "Penelope Clearwater was cleaning her glasses. She must have seen it reflected in the lenses."

Rianne nodded slowly. "And Mrs. Norris, wasn't she found next to a pool of water? She must have seen it reflected in that."

"But what about the other two?" Deanna asked. "How do we account for them?"

"That Hufflepuff kid was part of a double attack too." said Rianne, her mind coming alive with possibilities. "Except because the other victim was a ghost, no one remembers that. He must have seen it through Nearly Headless Nick."

"And Creevey?"

"Is never seen without his camera." Rianne finished. "First thing he'd have done would have been to take a picture of it. Don't you remember? His camera was found completely burnt-out with the film all melted. Probably saved his life."

"There's something to be said for geekiness after all." Deanna smiled thinly. "Mind you, Marlie's vanity saved hers - I wouldn't have had a mirror on me."

"Maybe now's the time to start then." Rianne tossed Marlie's mirror over to her. "Keep it with you, mate, we may need it again."

Deanna slipped it into her pocket. "Thanks." She shuddered, remembering her last encounter with a Basilisk. "Gods, Ri, a Basilisk? They're nearly impossible to fight, you can't even look at them! One false move, and you're gone. How on earth do we get rid of one of those? You'd need to be a Parselmouth to stand a chance."

Rianne sat back in her chair and gazed unblinkingly at her. "Then we had better get hold of one, hadn't we? When's the next Hogsmeade weekend?"

"Next week." replied Deanna. "That's if they don't cancel it."

"What with things as they are at the moment, Hogsmeade's probably safer than the school." Rianne observed. "I'll talk to Snape, persuade him to keep it on." She reached for a parchment and quill. "Secondly, we'll need to use Nestra."

"What on earth for?" asked Deanna, puzzled. "You're not sending her up against the Basilisk, I hope!"

"Of course not. I need to send a letter."

"Why, what are you planning now?" Deanna sat up, intrigued. She didn't know Rianne had any contacts with experience in snake-hunting. Unless...

"I'm doing what we should have done in the first place." Rianne paused, looking up from her letter. "I'm getting Lu back."

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Chapter Twenty Six Redeemer's Return

Luella, however, had rather more pressing concerns on her mind than an imminent return to Hogwarts. Like surviving.

"Sanguinothermos!"

The hex seemed to come from out of nowhere, hot on the heels of the one that had preceded it. A particularly nasty specimen, that. The Blood Boiling Curse which steadily raised one's internal body temperature. It was invariably fatal unless lifted in time, although it was normally used more as a means of torture than in a fight. However, it could also be blocked.

"Impedimenta Incantatem!"

A blue shield emerged from her wand, and deflected the incoming curse harmlessly into the wall before fading again. If only that block was more long lasting, Luella thought. Ah well. There were other methods of defending oneself.

Luella's opponent didn't hesitate. On seeing one hex diverted, she immediately hit back with another one.

"Tarantellini!" This time, the curse was on target and Luella found herself dancing frenetically, in a dance that wouldn't stop even with the dancer's eventual death by exhaustion. Damn. Somehow, she didn't think Finite Incantatem would work on this one. She was done for. Unless... She pointed her wand at her legs.

"Locomotor Mortis!"

It worked. The two spells cancelled each other out and she was free again. However, that didn't get rid of the more immediate problem of her prowling, masked opponent, who hadn't let her guard down for a minute. It was no good just blocking her spells, she was too good for that and knew all sorts of things that Luella didn't have a hope of fighting. There had to be a way to defeat her. Had to be. And yet she surely knew all

the blocks, all the moves, to deflect anything Luella could do. If only Luella could think of some way of using her magic against her.

In a flash, Luella realised what she had to do. She needed to do exactly that, use her assailant's magic to do the work. And hadn't she recently learned one spell that would do exactly that?

"*Unificatio Incantatem!*" she cried, just as her opponent hurled a Tickling Charm at her. The charm hit Luella, causing her to fall to her knees, sobbing with laughter as the tickling sensation started... but it also had the same effect on her opponent, who was also bending double, managing to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Damn you, Luella, you little...! Alright, alright, you win, I surrender!" The counter-charm was sent Luella's way, and the laughing subsided from both of them. Finally, Luella's opponent removed her mask, and with a flick of her wand, turned the main lights back on.

Luella blinked, rubbing her eyes as a sense of normality began to return. There she was, in the Tylers' front room as if nothing had happened, with Caitlin stretched out in front of her getting her breath back.

"Not bad!" Caitlin gasped, leaning back on her elbows. "You learn quickly." Her eyes narrowed. "Too quickly. Wish I'd never taught you that Copycat Charm now." She shook her hair out. "How about you lift it now? I don't want my spells linked to yours for all eternity."

"Shame." smiled Luella. "It would have made my exams a lot easier, although I'm not sure how Professor Snape would react when I spontaneously started flinging Dark Hexes around his lesson."

"Badly, you know how he hates being upstaged." Caitlin yawned. "Well? You going to undo it yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your hair on." Luella cast the severance spell and the bond between them dissolved. Caitlin smiled and got up, reaching out a hand to Luella.

"Alright then, I think that's enough for tonight. Well done, you did well there. Didn't lose your head, showed initiative, came up with some very good ideas. You're doing worryingly well in all this." She looked like she was appraising Luella carefully. "You do realise some of this is NEWT level stuff, don't you?"

"Is it?" Luella asked.

Caitlin nodded. "Oh yes." She smiled wryly. "Only some of it, mind you." She turned as an insistent ringing sound announced that they had visitors, frowning. "That's odd. Severus didn't say he was visiting tonight." She walked over to the mirror over the fireplace and tapped it with her wand. It filled with a pale blue mist, which parted to reveal the face of none other than Professor Dumbledore.

"Albus?" Caitlin asked, puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

"Good evening, Caitlin." said Dumbledore, with a smile that didn't hide the sadness in his eyes. "Can I come in? There's been some unexpected developments."

"Developments? What sort of developments?" This sounded rather ominous.

"Another attack." said Dumbledore quietly.

"Another...? Hades, Albus, who is it this time?" Caitlin noted the sadness in his eyes and felt her heart start pounding. "Is Deanna alright?"

This time, Dumbledore's smile was genuine. "No, she's fine."

"Thank the gods. But if Deanna's alright..." Caitlin shook her head, tapping the edge of the mirror again. "You'd better come in."

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"Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee?" Caitlin noted that Albus Dumbledore looked as if he'd hit his second century, never mind his first. "A very strong brandy?" she suggested.

Dumbledore allowed himself a smile at this. "No thank you, my dear. Tea will do just fine." He eased himself into an armchair as Caitlin sent Luella off to make the tea. "Unlike Severus, I've grown beyond the stage of using alcohol as a panacea for all my sorrows."

Caitlin knelt by his side, wondering what on earth was wrong with the old man. Yes, an attack was bad news, but he looked as if his entire world had caved in. She just hoped that it wasn't so, for Luella and Deanna's sake if no one else's.

"Albus," she began, "this attack. It wasn't fatal, was it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. No, it wasn't. But the next one might be."

"What makes you say that?" asked Caitlin.

"Because, my dear, the attack may not have been fatal, but it's still had unforeseen consequences." sighed the old man. "And now I really have no idea what will happen next."

Caitlin sat back, her concern mounting. To see Dumbledore this depressed was not good news. Rarely did he admit to not knowing at all what to do.

Luella reappeared with a tray containing two cups of tea, a bowl of sugar, a plateful of chocolate biscuits and a can of fizzy apple juice. Placing the tray on the coffee table, she took the can and a couple of the biscuits and perched herself on the arm of the sofa.

"I didn't know how much sugar Professor Dumbledore takes so I thought I'd let you do your own." She regarded her Headmaster as if he were some new exhibit at the

Science Museum, clearly dying to know why he was here but not quite bold enough to ask.

"Thank you, Luella." Caitlin added two spoonfuls of sugar to her own cup before turning to Dumbledore. "Still just one, Albus?"

Dumbledore paused. "Actually, Caitlin, make it two."

Caitlin chuckled as she added the sugar. "You might not be dependent on alcohol but the old sweet tooth never went away, did it?"

"I'm a slave to my sweets, I admit it." the old man confessed, the familiar twinkle returning as he sipped his tea. "By the way, that's a very fast boiling kettle you have there, Caitlin."

Caitlin turned to Luella, who was blushing and looking ever so slightly uncomfortable. "I believe it had a little help from the Arts Magick, did it not, Luella?"

"Might have done." Luella admitted, pulling the sleeve of her shirt over her wrist to conceal the tip of the wand poking out.

Dumbledore chuckled approvingly. "Good to see you're not letting her talent go to waste, Caitlin." He turned serious again. "We may well have need of it sooner than you think."

"Yes, you haven't told me why you're here yet." said Caitlin. "So, who was attacked then? I take it they're Petrified like the rest then."

Dumbledore nodded. "That's right. However, this attack was different. There was not one but two victims."

"Who?" asked Luella in hushed tones.

"One was the Gryffindor second year Hermione Granger."

Luella shut her eyes as she inhaled. "Poor Harry." she whispered, before opening them again. "And the other?"

"The other was a member of Slytherin House."

That had both Luella and Caitlin's attention.

"A Slytherin? But the Heir wouldn't attack a fellow Slytherin, would he?" asked Luella in surprise before laughing at her own naiveté. "What am I saying, of course he would if they got in the way."

"Which Slytherin?" asked Caitlin. "Don't suppose it was Draco Malfoy, was it?"

"No. It was not."

"Shame." said both Luella and Caitlin together.

"So who was it then?" asked Luella, growing impatient.

Dumbledore looked her straight in the eye. "It was your friend, Marlie Lovegood."

"Marlie?" Luella whispered, going pale. "No. Oh no." She shook her head, not able to believe that one of her own friends had fallen victim to the Heir, and furious at herself for not having been able to stop it.

"Poor girl." said Caitlin softly. She looked up at Dumbledore. "Has Mel been told yet?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus went over there this afternoon. They took it rather well considering. Severus tells me that Leonard and Melissa only shouted at each other for half an hour, and he and Melissa were eventually able to talk Leonard out of withdrawing both children from Hogwarts."

"I'll go over there later." said Caitlin. "I expect Mel'll want someone to talk to. Such bad luck to have something like this happen twice. Still, at least Marlie's sure to make it this time."

"There is that." said Dumbledore. "But will there be anything left for her to wake up to?"

Luella looked up at this, something having occurred to her. "Sir... if there's been another attack... and I was nowhere near at the time... does that mean I can go back? I mean, there's no way I could have done this, so I'm in the clear, right?"

Caitlin and Dumbledore exchanged looks. "Technically, yes, but there's a lot more to it than that." Caitlin sighed.

"It's true." Dumbledore confirmed. "Even if it were an open and shut case, the red tape and bureaucracy would take at least a week, if not longer. And it's not an open and shut case. Lucius has already told the governors that you can control the monster without physically being there, it's not impossible for him to maintain that you did it from Surrey. I'm sure he'd do his best to block any attempt to reinstate you."

"So I'm stuck here then." said Luella despondently.

"Not necessarily." said Caitlin thoughtfully. "If we could find a way to get rid of Lucius Malfoy, get him off the board of governors, we might have a chance."

"However," said Dumbledore, "probably the best way is for us to prove it wasn't you once and for all. To establish your innocence in such a way that not even Lucius Malfoy can gainsay you."

"How's that?" asked Luella.

"By finding out who it really was. By unmasking the First Heir of Slytherin and whoever is helping them." Dumbledore's eyes bored into hers. "If we can find who really is behind all this, you will be proved innocent beyond all reasonable doubt. It's the only way, Luella."

"But how am I meant to do anything from here?" Luella demanded. "All the action's at the other end of the country!"

"If I know Rianne Stormosi and my daughter, you'll find a way round *that*, I am sure." said Caitlin firmly. She turned to Dumbledore. "I suppose you'd best be getting back to Hogwarts, Albus. They'll need you there more than ever now."

Dumbledore shook his head. "They won't. Or if they do, they'll have to manage without me. Lucius didn't waste any time, Caitlin. Young Draco contacted his mother over the Floo to talk to her about what happened, and had the bad luck to have Lucius overhear, Severus tells me. I can actually believe that, Draco was rather fond of his cousin."

"He's got a funny way of showing it." remarked Caitlin sourly. "So what's he done now?"

"Talked to the rest of the governors demanding, and securing, my immediate dismissal as Headmaster." sighed Dumbledore. "I'm out of a job, Caitlin."

"What?" shrieked Caitlin, leaping to her feet. "They can't do that! Right! That does it! I'm going round to see each one of these craven cowards, and getting them to change their minds. Whatever Lucius had to threaten to get them to sack you, I'll make it sound like a hot tub and massage!"

"Caitlin, wait!" Dumbledore jumped out of his seat and stopped her before she could storm out. "It won't do any good. Lucius is too powerful for that. Minerva and Severus are running the school at present, they should be able to handle the situation. If all else fails, I shall encourage Severus to apply. That way, at least we will have someone loyal to us in charge, while Lucius will believe someone sympathetic to him is running the school. But I'm hoping it won't come to that."

"I hope not!" Caitlin shuddered. "Poor Severus, I hope he's coping with it all." She turned back to Dumbledore. "So where are you going to go now? That little house of yours in Hogsmeade?"

"Maybe." sighed Dumbledore. "It's not going to be easy, but I'm sure I'll manage."

"You could stay here." Caitlin suggested. "For the time being. I've a spare room, and it's not like you've never done the same for me."

Dumbledore blinked. "Really? Caitlin, are you sure? I don't want to impose..."

Caitlin dismissed his concerns. "Don't worry, of course you can. You gave me somewhere to stay after my mum died and I had nowhere to go. And you stopped them taking Deanna into care too. I want to return the favour."

"You don't need to do that." said Dumbledore. But he couldn't help smiling. "But I'll take you up on it anyway. I'd be glad to stay here a while. Just until everything gets sorted out."

"Which it will." said Luella. They both turned to look at her, having almost forgotten she was there. She was still sitting on the arm of a chair, clutching at the fabric beneath and looking more determined than they'd ever seen her before. "I'll find out who's causing all this and get them back, if I have to die doing it. The Malfoys will regret ever tangling with me."

Not, of course, that she had any immediate ideas as to how she was going to go about this. However, that didn't stop her brooding on it all night. Back in her own bed in her own home, a million miles away from the world where the Heir of Slytherin stalked the corridors of Hogwarts, she lay awake, thoughts of vengeance circling round and round her head. *Heir of Slytherin, you have truly upped the stakes now!* An attack on her friend had done what all the talk of quests and destiny and ancient prophecies could not - made her want to take him on with all her heart and all her soul. Once it had been an abstract responsibility. Now... now things had just got personal. But how was she meant to take revenge when she was stranded hundreds of miles away?

The answer came sooner than she thought. At that very moment, she heard a scratching at her window. Switching on her bedside light, she turned to see what it was.

And leapt out of bed with joy at seeing the familiar silhouette of Clytemnestra the peregrine falcon perched there with an envelope in her talons, sitting expectantly, waiting to be let in.

"Nestra!" Luella whispered, fumbling for the key and unlocking the main window. "Alright, girl, don't worry, I'm letting you in right now. Hold on!" Pushing the window open, she held the net curtain open as the falcon flew in, dropping an envelope on her pillow before perching on the headboard, cawing almost tenderly at Luella.

"Missed me, did you?" Luella smiled, running a finger underneath the falcon's beak before turning her attention to the envelope. Crawling back into bed, she ripped it open. "So what's your mistress go to say for herself then?" She unfolded the letter within and started reading, noting with a raised eyebrow that it was in Rianne's handwriting.

Luella, we have a problem.

She couldn't help smiling at that. Much as Rianne liked to present herself as a sophisticated Welsh-Italian pure-blood, the formative years spent abroad always seemed to show through whenever her friend was under stress. Specifically, the formative years spent travelling around America in the back of a caravan the size of the Tylers' house. Rianne had, of course, managed to get rid of all trace of an American accent, having moved back to Wales at age seven, but just occasionally it showed through.

The battle's just been taken right to our front door. Don't know if word has got back to you guys in Little Ol' England just yet, but the Heir's gone and done it this time. The bastard got Marls. Granger too.

Luella lowered the letter. Somehow, reading it in cold ink, in the bitter tones of someone right there on the scene, made it seem so much more real. They got Marls. Damn them. She forced herself to read on.

Security's gone haywire round here - six o'clock curfew, all clubs and activities cancelled, no one allowed outside their common room unless escorted by a teacher, it's like Camp Colditz in here. And we're getting mighty tired of it. Anyways, we couldn't get Steve McQueen, so we're counting on you instead. We need you back here, Lu. Damn the rules. Damn bureaucracy. You've gotta get yourself up here, and sort this asshole out once and for all!

"Arsehole, it's arsehole, when will you get it right?" muttered Luella. "You're not trekking round deepest, darkest Oklahoma now!" (Author's note: apologies to all residents of Oklahoma. I don't mean to imply that your state is in anyway uncivilised, it was just the first one that came to mind.)

There's a Hogsmeade weekend coming up this Saturday, assuming they don't cancel that too. Can you get the Floo up to the Three Broomsticks and meet us there at 3pm? You'll need to use Glamory to make sure you're not noticed, but that's not going to stop me seeing you, luckily for us.

Lucky indeed, thought Luella, beginning to smile. This sounded like it might actually work. She'd never dreamed it could be so easy to get back to Hogwarts. Of course, it was only temporary, but it might be all she'd need.

We'll sneak you back into Hogwarts, hide you in our dorm, talk things over, and when everyone's asleep, we'll go and have a look for this Chamber of Secrets. Sound good to you?

Very good indeed, Luella thought. She had no idea what they'd do when she got there, but just seeing her friends again would be a start.

If you're up for it, write and let us know. If there's any problems, we'll get back to you. See you Saturday, kiddo!

*Later,
Rianne*

Luella smiled as she reached for pen and paper and started to reply. Hadn't she just that minute been wondering how she was going to get up there and avenge Marlie? And now the answer had literally fallen into her lap. Attaching the reply to Nestra's foot, she watched the falcon depart, disappearing into the night.

"Heir of Slytherin, watch out!" she whispered. "The Redeemer's coming back!"

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Back at Hogwarts, the announcement of Dumbledore's departure had caused not a few students to start worrying. Even if the curfew hadn't been in operation, no one would have dared go wandering around the school anyway, not with Dumbledore gone. However, another related event had also caused quite a stir.

"Hagrid's gone to Azkaban?" Deanna asked, puzzled. Hagrid was an even less likely candidate for being the Heir of Slytherin than Luella had been. "Why?"

"It was him last time, that's why." Lucas Vetinari told her. "Apparently that's why he's not a full wizard - they expelled him back then after he got caught harbouring monsters. That's what my father says anyway."

Deanna turned to Rianne. "Hagrid harbouring monsters, why is that not a surprise?" She turned back to Lucas. "But he wouldn't deliberately set a monster on a student, would he? Or keep something that was attacking people."

"That's what I thought." Lucas replied. "But apparently Father reckons that people have been complaining, so the Ministry have packed him off to Azkaban as a precaution. Fudge himself ordered it, which is a bit of a surprise. Apparently, Melissa Lovegood was dead set against it and he had to overrule her."

"Because it's obviously not him." Deanna pointed out. "And Auntie Mel surely knows that."

Rianne, who had up til now been looking very thoughtful, finally decided to speak.

"So if the Ministry thinks it's him, and have packed him off to Azkaban, why haven't they pardoned Lu? She wasn't even here when Marlie and Hermione were attacked. So if Hagrid's now to blame, isn't that tantamount to admitting it wasn't her?"

Lucas just shrugged. "Couldn't tell you, Ri. Probably her case has been buried under a tangle of bureaucracy and been completely lost to sight. Besides, since when has the Ministry ever admitted it's wrong?"

All three of them had to agree that it had never yet happened. And then their conversation was interrupted by the voice of Draco Malfoy.

"That and the fact that certain less than friendly elements don't want her back here. And when those elements don't want something, it doesn't happen. Surely you're not so naive as all that?"

"Those elements being your father, perchance?" snarled Deanna.

Draco shrugged. "I can neither confirm nor deny that particular rumour."

"That's a yes then." said Rianne. Draco chose to ignore her.

"Malfoy, did you have a reason for being here?" Lucas asked impatiently.

"Just thought I'd give you some friendly advice." Draco suddenly dropped the languid exterior. "Listen, I want this stopped as much as you do. If they can attack a Slytherin, even a half-blood, they can attack anyone. And I liked Marls. So, listen up. Luella won't be coming back any time soon. So if you want her here, you'll have to break some rules in order to do it. Sneak her in, do what you have to. Once she's here, she can stop this. I don't know who's behind it, I've been told virtually nothing. But this I do know - Luella Martin's more than capable of bringing this to a close which is why she was expelled. So is Dumbledore, and that's why he's been disposed of."

"Your father had a hand in that too, did he?" snapped Rianne.

Draco's face darkened for an instant, before the earnest look returned. "Doesn't matter. Point is, Dumbledore was the last person in this school who could keep the Heir at bay. With him gone, there's no one left to stop the Heir. If you don't do something, there will be another attack, and next time it might be fatal. Next time it could be you. Think about it, Tyler." He gazed earnestly into their eyes for a few moments before turning and leaving.

Lucas watched him go. "Is it me, or has Draco Malfoy finally flipped?"

"Nah, he was always nuts." said Deanna. "But he does have a point. We do need Lu here."

"Ah." said Lucas. "Is this going to involve you two doing something incredibly stupid and illegal?"

"As if we'd do anything stupid." Rianne smiled.

"I notice you didn't deny the illegal part." Lucas observed. "In that case, I'd better leave you both to get on with it. If you get caught, I want no part of it. See you both." With that, he took his leave.

"Ri, I hope this plan of yours works." said Deanna quietly. "Malfoy's right, with Dumbledore gone, there's no one left to stop the Heir. There could be a death. There's more than just avenging Marls at stake here, the whole school's in danger. You know as well as I do that getting rid of Hagrid was just the Ministry trying to look like it was doing something about it."

"It'll work." said Rianne with her usual humility. "How can it not? It's simple. We get Lu back, she uses her psychic connection to the Heir to find out who it is, we find them, turn them in, mystery solved, school saved, we're heroes, Lu gets forgiven, everybody celebrates. It's foolproof. You'll see."

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Not all the Slytherins were as calm as Rianne, however. In particular, Ginny had taken recent developments very badly indeed. She'd spent most of the last few days lying face down on her bed crying, or walking around looking pale and trembling. She hadn't been eating much lately and both Lydia and Autumn knew she hadn't been sleeping well.

"Ginny, are you sure you're OK?" Autumn asked her, perched on Ginny's bed as the young Weasley lay curled up alongside her.

"Course not." whispered Ginny, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Marlie's gone! The Heir got her. Marlie's gone and it's all my fault!" She went off into another bout of sobbing.

"It's not your fault!" Autumn told her, taking the crying girl into her arms. "Just because she'd been looking for you at the time, doesn't mean you should blame yourself. She knew the Heir was still at large, she knew the danger. Gin, it wasn't anything to do with you, it wasn't your fault!"

Ginny just shook her head. "Oh, if you only knew..." she whispered.

"Knew what?" Autumn asked.

"Doesn't matter." Ginny said, just a bit too quickly. She stopped talking as the door opened and Lydia entered.

"Hey, Gin." she said gently. "Feeling better?"

"A little." said Ginny, forcing a smile and trying to dry her eyes.

Lydia nodded. "Well, that's some good news at any rate. Autumn, can I have a word with you quickly? I need a hand with my Herbology essay."

Autumn was not slow to pick up on the look in Lydia's eyes that clearly said Herbology was the last thing on her mind. Telling Ginny not to let it get to her, she followed her friend out.

Sure enough, the first thing Lydia did was drag her friend into the bathroom across the corridor, locking the door behind them.

"So, what's up, Lyd?" Autumn asked. "You've got that same look Rianne Stormosi gets when she's on to something."

"And with good cause." Lydia indicated the direction of their dorm with a flick of the head. "Ginny still blaming herself?"

Autumn nodded. "Yeah. I keep telling her it wasn't her fault, but she won't listen. Keeps saying if only I knew, I'd change my mind."

"Exactly." Lydia smiled thinly. "Autumn, I can't stop thinking about what Marlie said to us before she got attacked. The way she was asking questions about that diary, and that look in her eyes! She looked horrified when I mentioned that diary. Like I'd said Ginny was under a Death Spell or something. Then she told us to stay with other people and ran off. Almost as if she knew there was going to be an attack."

Autumn shook her head. "But how could she have done? None of us know who's behind it!"

"No?" laughed Lydia. She indicated towards the dorm again. "I think some of us know more than they're telling. I think Ginny's got an idea of who it is."

"You're not telling me Ginny Weasley's behind it, are you?" Autumn demanded. "Lydia, she's our friend. She's a nice girl, she wouldn't do anything like that! Besides, she likes Marlie! She's devastated by all this."

"Devastated... and perhaps just a little guilty?" Lydia suggested. "Autumn, I don't think it's her, but I do think she knows who it is. And I think that diary's linked to it all too."

Something occurred to Autumn. "The diary. Didn't you say she was holding it right after talking to Malfoy? You know, when she was acting weird and possessed? You don't think he's involved, do you? That maybe he's got a hold over her and the diary's evidence?"

"He wouldn't have given it back to her if it was evidence." said Lydia. "Either against him or her. If it's against her, he'd want to keep it for blackmail, and if it was against him, he wouldn't be letting it out of his sight. But I think you may be on the right lines, Autumn."

"So what do we do?" asked Autumn, shooting a fearful glance over her shoulder. "We can hardly go and ask Ginny straight out 'Are you helping Malfoy attack students?', can we?"

"No." said Lydia thoughtfully. "But we do need to do something. We'll have to have a word with Deanna and Rianne, get them to investigate. Marlie obviously knew something about that diary, chances are they do too. If we tell them what we know, they might be able to figure out just what's going on."

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So it was that the following day found the two first years approaching Deanna and Rianne at lunch. Despite it being exactly a week since the last attack, the atmosphere was alive with anticipation. After much discussion, it had been agreed that the Hogsmeade weekend would still be going ahead. Most of the students were not sorry to have an opportunity to get out of the school.

Nor were Deanna and Rianne, but for very different reasons. While they were both looking forward to seeing Luella again, they were both also beginning to wonder what exactly this was going to achieve.

"Rianne, have you actually thought this through?" Deanna whispered. "What are we going to do when she gets here? We've got no idea who to approach, where the Chamber is, or anything!"

"Yeah, but she might." Rianne whispered back. "She's Second Heir, she's got all sorts of weird psychic abilities, just her being here'll throw down a challenge to You-Know-Who. He'll have to reveal himself somehow. And when he does..."

"I hope you're right." sighed Deanna, by no means as confident. She looked up to see Lydia and Autumn standing there. "Do you two want something?"

"Er..." Lydia began uncertainly, turning to Autumn for support. Her friend gave her a nudge, motioning for her to get on with it. Lydia turned back, gathering her courage. "It's about Ginny."

"What about her?" asked Deanna, indicating for the two girls to sit alongside her. She gave Lydia a questioning look. "Is she OK?"

"Not as such." sighed Autumn. "She's taken this attack very badly."

"To be expected." murmured Rianne. She fixed Autumn very closely, gazing at her, guessing that there was more to this than met the eye. "And?"

"And..." Autumn took a deep breath. "Do you two know anything about a diary?"

That got their attention. Both fourth years swung round to face her, sitting bolt upright.

"A diary?" Deanna asked, with that same horrified look that Marlie had had when Lydia had told her. "What diary? Whose diary?"

"Ginny's." said Lydia. "She's got a diary, a small black book, has had since the year began. And, well, we think it's got something to do with the attacks."

Rianne put her spoon down, stunned. "Ginny's got a diary?" she whispered, exchanging looks with Deanna. "Write in it a lot, does she?"

"She used to, all the time." said Autumn. "Never let us see it though."

"I bet." said Deanna softly. "Go on."

"There's more." said Lydia. "Last Saturday, before the attack, Ginny wasn't herself. She was acting really strangely, really aggressive and touchy, and with this really deep voice. And her eyes looked odd. And she was clutching this diary. Wouldn't put it down. She stayed in the dorm all morning, telling us she wasn't well and virtually biting our heads off when we tried to talk to her. So we left her to it, and ran into Marlie at breakfast. We told her what had happened and she looked really concerned."

"Then we mentioned the diary." Autumn finished. "And as soon as she heard *that*, she took off immediately, saying she had to find Ginny. She warned us to stay with other people, not to go off on our own, like she knew there was going to be another attack. And she was right. Except I don't think she thought it'd be her."

"She never does." sighed Rianne. "Typical bloody Marlie. No sense of danger whatsoever. You were saying."

"Not much left to tell." Lydia shrugged. "Ginny was devastated afterwards. She's spent the entire week crying, blaming herself, saying it's all her fault. I know it's a natural reaction to be upset, but she's going over the top. Keeps hinting that if we

knew what she did, we'd blame her too. I don't think she did it, but she knows something. I'm sure she does."

"Poor Ginny." Deanna whispered, staring in horror. "Poor, poor girl. What she must have been going through, gods only know..." She leaned forward urgently. "Listen, Lydia, this is important. You two need to go and find Ginny right away, and *stay with her*. Don't let her out of your sight. This is really important. Also, get that diary off her if you can, preferably without her knowing. If she goes all weird and possessed, then you need to put the Body Bind Charm on her, stop her going anywhere. Then get the diary by any means necessary and keep it away from her, until we get back."

Lydia and Autumn nodded. "What about you, what are you going to do?" Lydia asked.

"We're going to Hogsmeade." Rianne answered. "We've got an appointment with someone who can help put an end to all this. And not a minute too soon, it would appear. We'll see if we can cut things short though, come back early. I'm hoping nothing will happen, but I don't want to leave you guys on your own for too long if we can help it."

At that moment, the bell rang, and various teachers and prefects began calling out for all those going to Hogsmeade to join them. Deanna and Rianne got to their feet.

"Right, we'll see you both in a couple of hours." said Deanna. "Remember, don't let her out of your sight, and if she shows signs of acting unlike her normal self, immobilise her. Understand?"

The two first years nodded. Although it hadn't been spelt out exactly why they had to do all this, both girls guessed that it wasn't wise to argue. Deanna and Rianne said their goodbyes before leaving to join the rest of the departing students.

"How serious do you think all this is, Lydia?" Autumn asked as they watched the older girls leave.

"Very, you saw the look on Tyler's face." said Lydia, biting her lip. "Come on, let's go and find Ginny. I only hope it's not too late for her."

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Meanwhile, Luella was making her way across the road to the Tyler house, fully equipped for the challenge of a lifetime. White sleeveless top that left her Mark fully visible, jeans and a pair of strong boots formed her outfit, topped with her newly unearthed Hogwarts cloak and Medea Tyler's wand tucked into her belt. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. She only hoped it would be enough.

Her parents had gone out shopping for the afternoon, off to some boring gardening centre that would probably take them all day. While she'd seen Caitlin with her own eyes mount that new motorbike of hers and head off Londonwards on it that very morning, presumably going to work, although taking a joyride wasn't out of the question. Of Dumbledore there had obviously been no sign - but Luella was confident that her Glamoury would be sufficient to conceal her.

In the time-honoured tradition, she placed her left hand on the gate sign and recited her maternal lineage.

"I, Luella Angelica Martin, Second Heir of Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, Redeemer of Slytherin, daughter of Celia Carroll, daughter of Kathleen Marshall, seek entrance to the home of the Lady Caitlin." Why these things always had to sound so pompous, Luella would never know. She would have preferred a simple 'Slytherin Redeemer. Let me in.' Still, that was tradition for you. It seemed to work though. The security charms faded out before her very eyes, and the wrought iron gates swung open to let her in.

The front door also opened as she approached it. Caitlin had primed things back in March so that she was admitted automatically. Evidently she trusted her. Luella felt a slight twinge of guilt at breaking in and hijacking Caitlin's Floo grate like this but there wasn't any alternative. It was the nearest one, and the only one she could make use of without getting spotted and thrown out.

Casting a Glamour over herself, she slipped into the hallway, not wanting to be spotted by her erstwhile Headmaster. He might not be her teacher any more, but he was still a powerful wizard and she didn't want to have to explain her mission to him. He might try and talk her out of it, or worse, alert someone at Hogwarts.

Fortunately, it seemed her luck was in. There didn't seem to be anyone around. Moving on into the living room, she took a look around. Empty. Breathing a sigh of relief, she dropped the Glamour and went over to the fire, lighting it with a word and reaching for the dish of Floo powder that was kept ready on the mantelpiece.

"Good afternoon, Luella." came Dumbledore's amiable tones from behind her. Nearly knocking the Floo bowl over in fright, she spun round, to find Albus Dumbledore watching her from an armchair which she could have sworn had been empty not a second before.

"How did you do that?" she demanded.

He tapped the side of his nose. "Magic, my dear, magic. And magic which you have yet to grasp and maybe never will, although one of your friends is making a surprising amount of progress towards it. But that's not important right now. Were you thinking of going somewhere?"

"Er..." Luella began racking her brains for an excuse that would justify her bizarre combination of magical and Muggle clothing, with a Mark concealable only by Glamoury fully on show and her wand at the ready. She couldn't think of one.

"Maybe." she said warily.

"Don't let me stop you." Dumbledore leaned back into the chair, putting his feet up on the footstool and folding his arms behind his head. "Although I do think it's a little discourteous to come here while Caitlin's back is turned and use her Floo connection without her knowing. Does she know you're planning to borrow it?"

"Er... no." Luella admitted.

"I see." Dumbledore regarded her closely. "Where are you off to anyway? Would it be a certain all-magical village in the Scottish Highlands by any chance?"

"It might be." Luella confessed, unable to directly lie to a teacher. Even a dismissed one.

"I thought it might be." Dumbledore unfolded his arms and sat upright. "Hogsmeade weekend this weekend, isn't it?"

Luella nodded, her heart sinking at having been unmasked so easily. Looked like all their carefully laid plans were in ruins. "I was going to meet up with Deanna and Rianne. They were going to sneak me into school and we were going after the Heir." She stared at the floor, defeated. Great, now not only was she in trouble, but her friends faced a detention on top of everything else they had to worry about. Wonderful.

Which was why his next remark caused her to almost jump out of her skin in surprise.

"An excellent idea, if I may say so."

Luella looked up, unable to believe her ears. "What?"

"I said, I think it's a good idea." Dumbledore repeated. "It's about time someone put a stop to things. And I think you have a better chance than most at doing just that."

"You do?" Luella asked, not able to believe her luck. Albus Dumbledore was giving her the green light to go after Voldemort?

"Oh yes." Dumbledore nodded. "You have that Mark for a start. Not to mention two very unusual magical talents. And something even more important." He indicated the wand in her belt. "That wand was the one that helped finish Lord Voldemort back in 1981. It was never able to finish its job - Voldemort killed its previous owner before she could finish casting her spell." A dark look flitted across his face as he said this, but it was soon gone. "Something of that unfinished magic still lingers in its core. Maybe you yourself have felt it. Tell me, haven't you ever looked at it and wondered if there's something in it resembling a soul?"

Luella had to admit she had.

"You see, it is no ordinary wand. It's a Slytherin wand, a wand with unfinished business." Here Dumbledore smiled. "What a House you are. Even your wands have vendettas."

"It's got lion sinews in it too." Luella grinned. "Typical Slytherins, eh? No opportunity missed to get one over the Old Enemy."

A hint of sadness appeared in Dumbledore's eyes. "Ah, Luella." he sighed. "Gryffindor House has never been your enemy. The greatest threats to Slytherin House have always emerged from within its own ranks, and most are traceable to the

endless feuding between its two most notable families. I pray your generation will come to its senses and end it."

"Well, we'll have to see, won't we?" said Luella. She checked her watch. "I'd better be going, I'm meeting Rianne at three."

"Yes, you'd better not waste any time." Dumbledore still sounded serious. "I think you will be needed there sooner than you think."

Luella didn't like the sound of this. "What do you mean, sooner than I think?" she asked. "Has something happened?"

"I don't know." said Dumbledore. "But I feel... uneasy. I think Voldemort may be about to make his next move, if he hasn't already. You will only just be in time, if in fact you are."

"That's not good news." said Luella, feeling her anxiety begin to mount. "Haven't you got anything encouraging to say?"

"Yes, just a few things. First, remember that you are not alone. You have far more allies than you realise, and I do not believe you will be alone when the final confrontation comes. Others too have a stake in this, and they will come to aid you. Second, I have not been idle this past year. I may not have been able to halt Lord Voldemort, but I have been able to keep him at bay, and I've been leaving magic of my own at Hogwarts. So long as there are those at Hogwarts truly loyal to me, then they shall always have assistance when they are most in need of it."

"And?" Luella asked, sensing that the old man was not yet finished.

"And finally, here is advice of a more practical nature." said Dumbledore, the familiar twinkle in his eye. "Were you thinking of going direct to the Three Broomsticks?"

"That's right." said Luella.

"Don't." he warned her. "You'll never get a Glamour in place before someone sees you, and even if you do, the sound of the Floo activating and no one arriving will set alarm bells ringing in even the least astute mind. You really need somewhere a little more private to arrive at."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." Luella felt her hope fading away. "Do you know of anywhere?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Dumbledore replied. "I happen to own a little house in Hogsmeade, just off the main market square. Nice little place, empty now of course. I hardly ever visit, and the last time it was used was after the end of the last war, when I let Caitlin stay there after the last battle left her homeless. However, the Floo grate still works, and if you're arriving, you don't need a lit fire either. Here, have the key." He produced a medium sized iron key on a chain and tossed it over to her.

"Thanks!" gasped Luella.

"No problem. The address you need is Tumbleweed Cottage, Hogsmeade. I'll let Caitlin know where you've gone, put her mind at ease."

Luella privately thought that telling Caitlin Tyler she'd gone off to Hogwarts for a showdown with Voldemort was likely to do the opposite but said nothing. Instead, she thanked him again and prepared to leave.

"Thanks, Professor! I really appreciate all this."

Dumbledore waved her away. "Not a problem, my dear, not a problem. If you succeed, we all benefit. If you don't, we will all suffer. Now, on your way, and the best of luck!"

"Thanks! I'll do my best." Luella promised. Turning away and reaching for the Floo powder, she took a deep breath and prepared herself. Then, with the words "Tumbleweed Cottage, Hogsmeade!", she stepped into the fire.

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By this time, Deanna and Rianne were firmly ensconced at a corner table in the Three Broomsticks. For some reason, there always seemed to be either a vacant table or someone about to leave whenever Deanna Tyler or Rianne Stormosi ever wanted a seat in the pub. It was one of those phenomena that no one had ever yet managed to explain. Right up there with another strange phenomenon, that when either of them wanted to be left alone, they generally were.

Today was no exception. A small group of third year Hufflepuffs had looked up, seen them walk in and immediately decided now was a good time to raid Honeydukes, leaving the table clean and ready for them. The two Slytherins took their seats without a word.

"Is she here yet?" Deanna asked. With Luella going to be covered in Glamoury, she had no way of knowing when her friend was actually going to arrive.

"No." said Rianne softly. "No sign of her anywhere. Although we are early."

"Aurors are always early, it's a standard security procedure." said Deanna. "And if my mother's been giving Luella any kind of tuition at all, she'll have told her that. What's up Ri, you look worried."

"I am worried." Rianne replied, biting her lip. "I'm beginning to wonder if you should have stayed at Hogwarts with Ginny."

"What, and leave you here all on your own? No chance!" smiled Deanna. "Besides, I want to see Lu again."

"Yes, but that means Lydia and Autumn are on their own with a Ginny who could be prone to possession by the diary at any moment." Rianne persisted. "I feel bad about leaving them to deal with that. Maybe you should have stayed, just in case things got

nasty. I could have kept watch for Lu here. It wouldn't have looked too suspicious, I could easily have persuaded Lucas to stay with me."

"I knew there was an ulterior motive." Deanna remarked with a grin. "You'll do anything for a bit of private time with Signor Vetinari, won't you?"

"Deanna, be serious!" Rianne snapped. "I'm telling you, I have a very bad feeling about all this. I still think you should have stayed."

"Well, too late now." Deanna shrugged. "I'm here. If there's any problems, Lu'll have to go and kick some arse, that's all."

"That's right, land me with all the work, why don't you?" A familiar voice came from in front of them, as a shadow cut off the light. Turning, they saw none other than Luella herself, standing there with her cloak billowing, hair falling loose around her face and a grin from ear to ear. "Hey, girls. Miss me?"

"Lu!" gasped Deanna, leaping to her feet and hugging her friend. "You made it!"

Luella returned the embrace, smiling tenderly. "Yes. I made it." She gave Deanna a squeeze, momentarily burying her face in her friend's hair, before releasing her and turning to Rianne, who was standing up to greet her. The two girls clasped hands.

"Hey Lu. Good to see you again."

"Hey, Rianne. Likewise, mate, likewise." Luella took a seat as they all sat down again. "So, people. The Heir got Marls, did he?"

"He did." Deanna confirmed. "Bastard."

Luella nodded. "And Malfoy's neutralised Dumbledore too."

Rianne nodded. "Yep. He doesn't waste any time, does he?"

"No, he doesn't." Luella stopped smiling. "Which is why we have to hurry. Dumbledore's currently staying at your house, Deanna."

"He is?" Deanna blinked. "Why?"

"Apparently he did the same for your mum once and she's returning the favour. But that's not important. What is important is that he spoke to me before I left. No, don't worry." Luella raised her hands, quieting their protests. "He's not going to intervene unless we need him. But he did tell me not to hang around. Reckons Voldie's about to make his next move, if he hasn't already, and that I'll only just be in time."

Rianne gave Deanna a nudge. "See? Told you you should have stayed!"

"Stayed?" Luella asked. "Stayed where?"

"With Ginny." Deanna explained.

"Why?" Luella asked, beginning to look very concerned.

"It's her," sighed Rianne. "She's been causing the attacks. Someone slipped You-Know-Who's diary to her at the start of the year, and she must have written in it not knowing what it was. And it's taking her over, making her attack people."

Luella stared in disbelief. "Ginny?" She shook her head. "Poor thing. And yet..." She began to look rather thoughtful. "Ginny, yes, it makes sense now. She borrowed my power back in January, I thought she was fending off an attack. She must have been trying to stop the diary taking her over, and when she called on me, it worked. She must have got rid of it in the toilets. Then Harry found it, it made its way back to us... and Ginny obviously recognised it when Deanna took it and stole it back off us." She looked at Deanna. "If she wasn't in so much danger, I'd have to slap her." She got to her feet. "We have to find her. If Dumbledore is right, and you're getting Sight warnings too, he could be making a move again even now."

Rianne and Deanna got to their feet to follow her, but they never got the chance to leave. At that moment, Laetitia Vetinari and Percy Weasley walked in.

"All Hogwarts students to stop what they're doing and come with us!" Percy announced. "Everyone to come back to school immediately."

"What, now?" asked Deanna.

"Yes, now." snapped Percy irritably. "That's what immediately means, isn't it?"

Rianne ignored Percy and approached Laetitia. "Tish, what's going on? We're not meant to be going back for another hour and a half yet."

"We're not sure ourselves, to tell you the truth," Laetitia sighed. "All we know is that McGonagall just sent an owl out calling for all students to return at once. I'm very much afraid though that something may have happened." The look on her face left them in no doubt what she meant by that. "Listen, everyone's assembling outside. You two go and join them, last thing we want is for something to happen to you as well." She turned away and began shepherding various children outside, some more willing than others.

Deanna turned to Luella and Rianne. "Well, folks, looks like you were right. He's made his next move. I only hope we're in time." However, she did not look optimistic.

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Deanna's fears were proved to be right. A quick survey of the Slytherin common room proved that Ginny was nowhere in sight. As soon as Rianne and Deanna entered, they were met by Lydia and Autumn, both near tears.

"We couldn't find her!" Autumn sobbed. "We went straight back to the dorm, but she wasn't anywhere round here. We got Mike Lovegood to check the library too and Draco volunteered to search the boys dorms but she wasn't there either."

Lydia had her arm round her distraught friend. She was more composed, but still looked terrified. "We couldn't find the diary either." she whispered. "I went through Ginny's things but there's no sign of it anywhere. Wherever she is, she's got it with her."

"We're sorry!" Autumn wept. "We're really sorry!"

"It's alright." Deanna tried to reassure her. "It wasn't your fault. You tried your best. If anything, it's mine, I should have stayed with you. Don't blame yourselves."

Autumn nodded, still sniffing but not as upset as she was. Lydia was still watching them both, intrigued.

"Did you find whoever you were supposed to see in Hogsmeade?" she asked.

Rianne and Deanna exchanged looks and smiled, Rianne glancing over Deanna's shoulder to where Luella, safely hidden by her Glamoury, was standing.

"Yes, we found her." Rianne turned back to the first years. "Listen, we're going to do our level best to save Ginny, alright? We've got what we needed, we're ready to go. I won't pretend we're out of the woods yet, but we're going to try. OK?"

Lydia nodded, managing a smile. "Gotcha. Thanks, Rianne." She led Autumn away.

At that moment, the door opened, and the excited buzzing that had swept the common room stopped as Professor Snape walked in.

Rianne was first to approach. "Sir, what's happening? Has there been another attack?"

"No. Worse." Snape settled himself into one of the high-backed antique chairs that pre-dated the Lovegood Decor Revolution. "You had all best sit down, this is not good news."

The assembled Slytherins did as he asked, every one of them apprehensive. None of them, save Luella, had ever seen their House Master look so defeated as he did now.

"I said there wasn't another attack." he began. "Strictly speaking that's not true - the Heir of Slytherin *has* struck again. But the victim was not Petrified this time."

"Oh my god, there's been a death." Blaise Zabini breathed. She wasn't the only one looking shocked. All the Slytherins, even Malfoy, looked as if they'd been slapped.

Snape didn't deny it. "It would appear so, yes." he said softly. "Prepare yourselves, children, it gets worse. The victim's body has yet to be found - she's been taken by the monster into the very Chamber itself."

There was a collective gasp from the gathered Slytherins. Pansy Parkinson gave a little shriek and hid her face.

"How do you know?" whispered Draco, sitting beside her, arms draped protectively around his friend.

"There was a message underneath the first." said Snape very deliberately. "It read *Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever*. The girl in question's not been seen since lunchtime."

"Who?" Mike Lovegood asked. "Who is it?"

Snape lowered his eyes. "It is my grave misfortune to have to tell you that the girl was one of us."

"No!" cried Autumn, bursting into tears as she realised who the victim must be. Sinking into Lydia's arms, she began to weep helplessly. "Ginny, Ginny, no!" Lydia didn't say a word, but a single tear began to make its way down her face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Montague." Snape said, his voice rather gentler than usual. "It was indeed your friend Miss Weasley."

The room was silent, apart from the sound of Autumn's sobbing. Virtually every Slytherin in the room had been stunned into silence. Bad enough to have one of their number Petrified. Far worse to have one missing, presumed almost certainly dead. Even Draco was observed hanging his head in sorrow, drawing Pansy into a hug.

Snape got to his feet. "Professor McGonagall has instructed me to inform you that she is closing the school as of now. The Hogwarts Express will be arriving first thing tomorrow after breakfast to take you all home. Your families will be informed. Arrangements are being made with schools elsewhere, notably New Hogwarts in Maine USA, the Salem Witches Institute in Massachusetts, Emerald City Academy in Kansas, Beauxbatons in the South of France, Durmstrang in the far north, and various other schools, to take as many of you as possible, although should your parents wish to make other arrangements, they may do so." He paused. "I should like to offer my condolences to all of you. I know Miss Weasley was popular with a great many of you. I too will miss her." With that, he turned and left.

As soon as he was gone, the room burst into talk and chatter.

"Closing the school? They can't do that, surely!" Summer Montague was heard saying.

"They can, kid, and it looks like they just did." came Mike's reply. "Look, don't worry, it'll be OK, they'll find places for us all."

"Draco, you have to find me a place at Durmstrang!" Pansy's shrill voice cut through the air. "I am NOT going to the Salem Witches Institute! It's so horribly worthy and they have these stupid sororities where you have to toady up to the leaders in order to get in, and all the sorority girls look down on everyone else, and they're all just so bloody girly!"

"Chill, Pan, I'll find you a place at Durmstrang," snapped Draco. "Now in the meantime, can you just shut up about school? I've got more pressing concerns right now!"

Lydia turned to Deanna, tears in her eyes. "Can you... will you... is there anything you can do?"

Deanna squeezed the first year's shoulder. "I don't guarantee anything, Lydia. Ginny could already be dead by now. But I promise to try." She turned to Rianne, who was looking more than a little puzzled. "Come on. Let's talk."

Rianne nodded and, with a nod to Luella to join them, followed her out.

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Luella flung down the Glamour as she entered the dorm.

"Damn it, Dumbledore was right," she sighed, flinging herself on to her long-empty bed. "Voldie was planning his next move. And I was too late to stop him."

"Not your fault," Deanna sighed, joining her. "It's mine. When I heard Ginny had that diary, last thing I should have done was head off to Hogsmeade. Should have stayed with Lydia and Autumn, maybe I could have stopped this."

"Or maybe not," Rianne countered, pulling up a chair. "You heard them, by the time they reached the dorm, Ginny had already gone. But here's what I find bizarre. We've already established that Ginny is the one causing the attacks. So why has the Heir abducted her? Surely he needs her to carry on working for him? Why kill her if she's still useful?"

"Why indeed," murmured Luella. She looked at her Mark. "I'm wondering if this wasn't an attack, but more... a challenge. The Heir must know that abducting Ginny leaves us with no choice but to go after her. A Petrification requires no action from us - all we have to do is wait for them to be revived. But an actual abduction..." She looked both of her friends in the eye. "As of yet, there's no body been found. Knowing what we know, there's a very good chance that Ginny's still alive. And if she's still alive, then we have to do something. We have to find the Chamber, get inside, rescue Ginny, grab that diary and get back out again. Then go to Snape with the evidence. He must surely know who Riddle is, and he'll know it wasn't Ginny's fault. With all the evidence, we can get my expulsion overturned then have that diary destroyed. Are you two with me?"

"Absolutely, Lu. Just one tiny flaw. We don't actually know where the Chamber is." Rianne pointed out.

Luella just shrugged. "We'll find it. I'm the Second Heir, the knowledge must be inside me somewhere. I'm positive I was being called to it when it first opened. If we go to where the first attack happened, maybe we can figure things out from there."

"Sounds good to me." Rianne said. "There's just one other thing you ought to know. The monster's a Basilisk."

"You're not serious." Luella took in the looks on her friends' faces. "You are serious aren't you. Jesus Christ."

"No good asking him for help." Deanna told her. "One of the Middle East's most gifted mages ever he might have been, but that doesn't change the fact that he's indisputably, without a doubt, dead. Despite what the Muggles may think."

"Pity, casting out demons was a speciality of his." sighed Luella. "Never mind. A Basilisk, eh? Well, I'm a Parselmouth, aren't I? Maybe I can bargain with it. Offer it freedom in a remote part of South America in return for not killing us."

Rianne and Deanna couldn't help laughing.

"Sounds like a plan to me!" laughed Deanna. "Ri, any comments?"

Rianne shook her head. "None. Let's do it!"

"Alright then." Luella got to her feet. "Let's go to work."

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Chapter Twenty Seven The Chamber of Secrets

The Slytherin Common Room was still eerily silent as they entered it. Even given that the music wasn't playing for once, the common room was never normally this quiet.

Despite that, no one really reacted as the three girls, two visible, one cloaked in Glamoury, passed by. The only one to move was Draco.

"Where are you going?" he asked, frowning. "Not going to stick around and share the vigil?"

Deanna opened her mouth, about to snap back an angry retort, but Rianne stopped her with a touch of her hand.

"We're going on a rescue mission." she told him. "We're off to find the Chamber, kill the Heir, retrieve Ginny if she's still alive, and if she's not, bring her back for burial. Got a problem?"

Draco, who had half risen out of his seat, sat back down again. "No, not really. You do realise you'll both be killed in the process, don't you?"

Rianne just shrugged. "Better than sitting around doing nothing. I'm not going to wait for him to come for us too."

"Good luck with it then." said Draco. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Putting his feet up, he resumed his previous occupation of staring into the fire.

"Didn't offer to come along too, did he?" muttered Deanna as they left.

"Yeah, but Tyler, would you really want him along anyway?" Rianne whispered back.

"Well, no." Deanna admitted.

"Good thing he is such a craven coward." Luella added. "I don't want him knowing anything about this until we're done. Let him think we're off on a fool's errand. No need for him to know I'm back."

There was no argument at this. There was an unspoken feeling that this confrontation was their business and theirs alone. This was personal.

They proceeded in silence, Luella extending the glamour around all of them as they slipped past Snape's office. Probably not a good idea for him to know what they were up to. He might try and talk them out of it, although Luella felt herself pining for a word of comfort from him, a piece of advice, his reassuring presence alongside her. Caitlin too, ideally. Now that she was actually on her way for the final showdown, it hit her that she was really having to do this, really going into a fight to the death with Voldemort or one of his agents. Yes, she'd fought him last year, but last year she'd had Snape, Dumbledore and Caitlin around too. Now she was on her own, with only her friends and her own resources to protect her. She just hoped it would be enough.

At length, they arrived at the first floor corridor where Luella had first seen the fateful message that had started all this. Sure enough, there underneath it were the chilling words "*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.*" Luella shivered at the mere sight of it. Stop it, she told herself. If what you know is true, Ginny could well be alive still. Well, that was true enough. But she also couldn't shake the feeling that she was walking into a trap.

"So now what?" asked Rianne "We're here. This is where it all started. Where do we go now? Any ideas, Lu?"

Luella traced the outline of her Mark. It didn't react. "No." she sighed. "I'm none the wiser." She tried to ignore the little voice inside her that jumped for joy at the prospect of not having to go into mortal danger after all. "Your Sight telling you anything?"

Rianne shook her head. "What, when I actually need it to? As if. Ask me who's going to win the 10.30 at Aintree tomorrow and I can give you the top three and odds at the start. Ask me where the Chamber is and my Inner Eye seems to have developed cataracts."

Deanna reached inside her cloak and began fumbling in her pocket. "Wait up, Lu, there's something I need to give you. I think it might come in useful." She dug around some more before withdrawing her hand, shimmering as the torchlight caught the golden links draped around it, and the small, winged ball dangling from it.

"Marlie's necklace!" Luella breathed. "Where'd you get that?"

"Off Marlie, duh." smiled Deanna. "Took it off her after she got Petrified. Didn't want it left lying around." She passed it to Luella. "It was in the Chamber of Secrets fighting Voldie, a Basilisk, and Marlie's shadow side that Marlie finally got out of her Sleeping Death trance and earned this little beauty. Marlie reckons that the spirit of her shadow, now allied to her, lives on in this thing, looks after her. I think you should wear it now - it might protect you."

"Like it protected Marlie so well against that Basilisk attack." Rianne muttered.

"Oh, I don't know." said Luella thoughtfully, gazing into the Snitch. "She did survive after all. If she hadn't found Hermione, she'd have been dead. Maybe this had a hand in it." She unfastened the clasp and placed it around her neck. Deanna stepped behind her and secured it, before lifting Luella's hair out of the way, allowing the necklace to fall into its proper position.

"There!" said Deanna in satisfaction, moving around to face her friend. "You're armoured and ready to go."

Rianne surveyed her with a critical eye. "Suits you. At least when we all get killed, you'll die looking amazing. Marlie will be pleased. Nothing more upsetting at a funeral than a badly dressed corpse."

"Rianne, stop being so morbid." snapped Luella, not wishing to be reminded that they could all be joining Ginny dead on the floor of the Chamber if they weren't careful. "We're going to make it."

Deanna, who had been staring into the distance, suddenly held up a finger, motioning for them to be quiet.

"What's up?" whispered Rianne.

"Voices." murmured Deanna. "Coming from that way."

Luella listened too. Sure enough, she could make out the sound of people talking drifting towards them from up the corridor.

"Let's go."

As they drew nearer, the voices seemed to have a kind of echo to them. Luella realised with a start that they were coming from Moaning Myrtle's toilet. But the speakers weren't ghosts.

"In there." she whispered to Deanna. Her friend drew her wand, stepped forward and with one fluid move, kicked the door open and strode in.

"Freeze." she said calmly. "Or you'll wish the Heir had got you... hello?" She lowered her wand. Before her were Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Moaning Myrtle and Gilderoy Lockhart. Myrtle, who had been perched on a cistern, looking over Harry's shoulder,

took one look at Deanna, shrieked, and dived down the toilet. Deanna had that effect on non-Slytherin ghosts, for some reason.

Ron looked up, saw who it was, and smiled, a rather cold, cruel smile.

"Cool. Reinforcements."

Harry, who had been staring intently at one of the taps, looked up in surprise.
"Deanna?"

Deanna sighed and turned to her friends. "It's alright. Only Harry and Ron. You can put your wands away."

She stepped aside as Luella and Rianne came in. Harry took one look at Luella, resplendent in her fighting gear, and raced over to her.

"Lu!" he yelled, overjoyed to see her again. "You're here!"

"I'm here." Luella smiled as the two of them hugged. "You really think I'd miss out on the action?"

"No, but..." Harry shook his head, unable to stop smiling. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

Luella just grinned. "Lots of people make that mistake. Lucius Malfoy, for one."

"Are you going after him too?" Harry asked.

"Maybe. Not yet."

"When you do... can I watch?"

Luella laughed. "If you like." She looked over his shoulder and saw Ron, who had the grace to look away, embarrassed.

"What's the matter, Weasley?" she said softly, remembering the letter she'd received from Deanna not long after returning home, informing her just who it was who'd betrayed her. "Heir of Slytherin got your tongue?"

Swallowing, Ron approached her, still not looking her in the eye. "Sorry." he whispered.

"Didn't quite hear that, Ron." Luella cupped her ear.

"I said, sorry." he repeated. "I should never have gone to Malfoy. I was an idiot, and if you'd still been here, Ginny and Hermione might have been OK." He looked at Luella's Mark. "Harry was right, wasn't he? The Second Heir's one of the good guys, isn't she?"

Luella just nodded.

"And it really is you, isn't it?" Ron continued, not taking his eyes off the caduceus etched on her skin.

Luella nodded again.

"I am such a prat." said Ron quietly.

"Yes. You are." said Luella.

Ron finally dared to meet Luella's eyes. "Can you... I mean, will you... Will you help me find my sister?"

Luella nodded. "Yes, alright. I will. But not for your sake. For hers. Because I like Ginny, and she doesn't deserve to get caught up in all this." She gave Ron a very hard stare indeed. "Be thankful, Ron Weasley. I'm not one to bear grudges, and right now, I have more important things on my mind than vengeance on you. Besides, you're really not worth bothering with."

Lockhart, who up to this point had been lurking at the edge of the room, decided that now was time to make his get away.

"Well, you don't seem to need me anymore, I'll just be on my way... ah."

Rianne had stepped into his path, blocking the doorway and his only escape route.

"Going somewhere, Gilderoy?" she drawled, the tip of her wand inches from his face.

"Er, no, no, not at all." he stammered. "Just your friends here wanted me along, but if there's the two of you and the Second Heir of Slytherin too, you won't be needing me..." He made to move past her, but Rianne was having none of it. She blocked him at once, her wand now actually touching him.

"What do we do with him, Lu?" she called out.

"Well, he's not going anywhere." said Luella decisively. "He knows too much. Suppose he'll have to either stay here immobilised or come with us."

"I'm for immobilisation." Deanna volunteered. "Don't want him getting in the way, offering constructive advice on the best way to kill a Basilisk."

Lockhart nearly jumped out of his skin at this. "A... a Basilisk?" he stammered, trembling. He clutched his chest. "Oh my heart, my poor heart."

"Oh shut up." snapped Rianne. She turned to Harry. "Why'd you bring him along anyway?"

Harry was about to explain what had really happened, but Ron interrupted him.

"Human shield." said Ron promptly.

Rianne's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, I *see*. A decoy. Good thinking. You're obviously smarter than you look."

"Blimey." said Deanna. "A use for Gilderoy Lockhart. Who'd have thought it?"

"Who indeed." Luella remarked. She turned to Harry. "So where is the Chamber anyway? Any ideas? I'm sure it's around here, but unless it's opened, I have no idea."

Harry patted the sink. "Right here. We found out the girl who died last time was found in the toilets. So we thought, who do we know who died in a toilet? And the answer was..."

"Moaning Myrtle!" Luella said, enlightenment dawning. "You mean, it's right here?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. Right behind this very sink. There's a picture of a snake on one of the taps, we think that if you say something in Parseltongue it'll open."

"Ingenious." murmured Luella. She fixed Harry with a penetrating stare. "So if that's all it takes, why haven't you opened it yet?"

"Ah. Er..." Harry began, before Ron interrupted.

"He had performance anxiety, and couldn't manage it." Ron informed her, smirking slightly as Rianne and Deanna began to snicker behind him. "You might have to give him a hand."

Deanna had to sit down after hearing that, while Rianne looked like she was in pain. Luella glared furiously at them.

"Will you two cut it out?" she yelled at them. "We're on a serious, life or death mission here and all you can do is snigger at double entendres?"

"Sorry." sniggered Deanna.

"I should hope so too. Ri, Lockhart's making another bid for freedom."

Surely enough, Lockhart was taking advantage of the distraction to head for the door. Swearing, Rianne pointed her wand at the door.

"*Via Interdictus!*"

The door swung shut and magically sealed itself as Lockhart got to it. Try as he might, he couldn't get it open.

"That's better." said Luella. She turned back to Harry, who had gone a deep shade of vermillion and was looking daggers at Ron. "So the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is hidden inside a girls' toilet?"

"That's right." said Harry, with as much dignity as he could muster.

Luella looked the sink up and down. "Well, at least he had a sense of humour. Better do it then, hadn't we?"

This time, no one laughed, although the corners of Deanna's mouth twitched a bit. The prospect of actually going into the Chamber of Secrets was something that could kill levity faster than a Misery Potion. Steeling herself, Luella approached the tap, and spoke, the Parseltongue coming as effortlessly to her as if it were her mother tongue.

"Open up in the name of Morgan. The Second Heir demands entrance." They all caught their breath as the sink began to move. Shaking and juddering as the tap began to spin, the whole basin began to sink into the ground with a noise that was probably audible all over Hogwarts. Luella clasped her hands to her ears. There went the element of surprise. Ah well. They were probably expected anyway.

The sink disappeared into the floor, leaving a four-foot wide hole in the wall, which on closer inspection proved to be a giant pipe winding away into the depths of the castle.

"Gods all mighty, what is that smell?" gasped Rianne, trying not to gag.

"I don't know. I don't want to know." said Ron weakly. "Look at the slime, though, we're going to get filthy." He shivered. "Tell you what, Harry, if we survive this, my mum is going to kill me."

"Good thing we didn't bring Marlie after all." commented Deanna. "She'd never have gone down there, not in a million years."

"Yeah, but hey, look on the bright side." grinned Rianne. "Lockhart has to." She indicated to where a repulsed Gilderoy Lockhart was vomiting into a sink.

Luella stepped up to the pipe, glancing ruefully at her vest. "Looks like I picked the wrong day to wear white." she sighed. She turned to Harry. "Well? Shall we go?"

Harry was looking pale, but nothing was going to shift the determination in his eyes.

"Let's do it." he said quietly. And with that, he climbed into the hole and slid away.

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The tunnel proved to be less threatening than it had appeared from the outside. Once you were in, you didn't have time to feel nervous. In fact, it reminded Harry of all the times he'd been on the helter skelter at the local fairground as a kid, apart from the fact that this time he didn't have Dudley at his back, kicking him in the head and shoulders because he wasn't going fast enough.

Finally, the pipe spat him out into a horizontal tunnel which seemed to wind its way into the very depths of the castle. Dark. Very dark.

"Lumos." he whispered, pointing his wand into the distance. The wandlight revealed nothing. If this was the Chamber, he didn't think much of it.

He cried out as a large, fast-moving weight crashed into his legs. Stepping back, rubbing his calf muscles in pain, he turned to see a black and denim bundle on the ground at the end of the pipe, which on closer inspection proved to be Luella.

Reaching out his hands, he pulled her to her feet. She was covered in water, dust and slime, although her cloak seemed to have taken the worst of it. Harry watched as she pushed the hair out of her eyes and tried ineffectually to smarten herself up.

"Yeuch." she breathed. "I look hideous. Couldn't Salazar have picked somewhere a bit more salubrious to have his evil lair?"

"You look fine." Harry told her, and meant it. She was still pretty, despite the grubbiness. Besides, a quick look at his own clothes confirmed he looked no better than she did.

Luella raised an eyebrow but didn't get time to answer. Another bundle had shot out of the pipe, rolling over and coming to a halt.

"Oh gods." it moaned. "Oh gods, oh gods, no."

Lockhart. Harry, by now beginning to regret ever having involved him, sighed and walked over, giving the once glamorous professor a hand up. He was by now sobbing uncontrollably.

"My robes, my robes, my beautiful robes!" he wept. "These were Stormosi di Milano originals! And now look at them! Ruined!"

He did have a point. The velvet purple and heliotrope robes were splattered from head to foot in slime, the silk cloak was in rags, and the hat seemed to have disappeared.

"Oh, shut up." Harry told him. "I'll buy you some new ones if it means that much to you."

"Anyway," Luella added with a grin as she joined Harry, "there's far more important things to worry about."

"Like what?" asked Lockhart.

Luella's grin widened. "You haven't seen what's happened to your hair."

Lockhart shrieked and clapped his hands to his head, grimacing as he realised his fingers had entangled themselves in the untidy, slimy mess that had once been his immaculately groomed hair. Sinking to his knees, he howled his grief out for all to hear.

Ron was next to arrive. Picking himself up, he glared at Lockhart.

"Might have known it was him. What happened, did he break a nail or something?"

"He's having a bad hair day." Luella explained.

"My heart bleeds for him." Ron responded testily. He looked around. "Is this it then? I'd expected it to look bigger."

"We're not there yet." snapped Luella. "It's down there somewhere." She indicated the tunnel winding into the darkness. Ron followed her gaze and shivered.

"Dark, isn't it?"

"Dark?" hissed Luella. "Of course it's bloody dark! It's an underground passage way, what did you expect it to look like? Marble floor with rose petals scattered over it? Solid gold handrails at the side? Silken tapestries lining the walls? A red carpet rolled out with a big sign saying "Chamber of Secrets this way"?"

"Don't be silly." growled Ron. "All the same though, I was expecting some torches on the walls."

"Wuss." Luella told him. "Switch your wandlight on if it bothers you that much." They all looked at his wand, held together with Spellotape and looking more like a children's party entertainer's wand than that of a proper wizard.

"Actually, maybe not." said Luella hastily. She drew her own wand and cast the Lumos charm as Rianne arrived.

"Well, wasn't that fun?" she gasped as Harry and Ron helped her up. "Novel, I'll give it that." She looked around. "What, no statues of His Most High Slytherinness? How disappointing. I always thought Salazar was more of a megalomaniac than that."

"This isn't it." seethed Luella. "It's that way."

"What, more walking?" sighed Rianne. "Now if Salazar was any kind of proper villain, he'd have laid on some transport. Either that or his minions would have found us by now and we'd be hanging head first over the piranha pit."

"Wouldn't snakes be more appropriate?" Harry asked.

"Nah, his worst enemies would have the power to negotiate with them." Rianne responded. "Although knowing him, he'd do it anyway just for the show, leaving a great big Achilles Gonads like most Evil Overlords do."

"Don't you mean Achilles Heel?" asked Luella. Rianne just looked at her rather strangely.

"Lu, no one ever won a fight by kicking someone in the heel." She turned as Deanna slid into view. "Not even Tyler."

"What about me?" Deanna asked as she scrambled to her feet. She looked around her. "You know, this isn't how I remember it. It was bigger in Marlie's dream."

"For the last time." sighed Luella. "We're not there yet! It's down thataway."

Deanna looked suspiciously down the tunnel. "Oh dear. That looks ominous. Everybody watch where you're treading, there'll be booby traps everywhere."

At this, Lockhart gave a little yelp and headed for the pipe. Rianne and Ron grabbed his arms.

"Oh no you don't." snapped Ron, thrusting him forward. "You're going first."

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Deanna turned out to be right, and yet also wrong. True, the tunnel was infested with booby traps. However, whoever had designed them had forgotten that they'd have to wait over a thousand years before anyone passed that way.

So it was that when Ron, bringing up the rear, trod on the wrong part of the floor and twelve rather nasty looking spears shot up from the floor, tragedy was avoided by the fact that they only went up six inches before grinding to a halt.

Harry inspected the spears.

"You know, Lu, as booby traps go, that's not very impressive."

Rianne knelt down and examined them. "They're all rusty." She looked up, grinning. "Machinery must have fallen apart from lack of maintenance."

Ron burst out laughing. "You what? You mean Salazar Slytherin set up all these elaborate defences to keep people out, and they've stopped working due to old age? Oh, that's brilliant. Just too amazing for words!"

"Isn't it just?" Rianne got to her feet. "Tyler, I think we can safely stop worrying. These traps are no danger to anyone."

Deanna immediately stopped pointing her wand at Lockhart's head. "In that case, our brave leaders Harry and Lu can take the lead. Let's keep our decoy for the Basilisk, shall we?"

And so it proved. The crossbows with the poisoned bolts didn't shoot properly and the bolts remained wedged in the crossbows, the slab of rock that lowered from the ceiling to try and trap them stopped halfway, and although they had a bit of a scare when the gigantic ball that rolled down the passageway proved to work just fine, the concealed pit full of long-dead venomous snakes turned out to be just big enough for the ball to fill up entirely, neutralising two traps in one go.

By the time they got to the final turn of the passageway then, the little party was in a jubilant mood. If the traps were in that poor a condition, what would the Chamber itself be like? Deanna and Ron began joking about a Basilisk with its teeth falling out and arthritis in its spine, and an Heir of Slytherin with a Zimmer frame.

"Let's face it, Tyler, this could be the easiest fight of our lives!" enthused Ron. "We might not even need to feed Lockhart to the snake!"

Deanna pouted. "Ohhh. I was looking forward to that. Can we feed him to the snake anyway? Poor thing must be hungry after all that time."

"Oh, alright then." Ron grinned. "We might have to cut him up for it though."

"Not a problem." smiled Deanna, flexing her wand.

"Cut it out you two." said Luella absently. "Snakes don't need to chew anyway, they can unlock their jaws and swallow their prey whole." She stopped short as they arrived at their destination. Up ahead were two huge doors with the familiar symbol of the caduceus twinkling in the gloom. No doubt about it. They'd made it.

Everyone fell silent, the levity gone. The doors didn't look as if they'd aged a day since Salazar built them. All thoughts of a Basilisk with false teeth and an Heir with a Zimmer frame vanished as the memory of what the Heir was capable of returned. The illusion of an easy victory slithered away and died a quiet death in the shadows.

"Looks like we made it." Harry whispered. Leaving the others, he approached the doors and looked them up and down. No handle. No lock. He gave them a little push. No response.

Luella walked up behind him and joined him. As she did so, her foot touched yet another trap activator buried in the floor. This time, a segment of the roof above her moved, revealing a pile of rocks poised to fall down and bury the unwary. However, despite shifting a little, they stayed put. Luella breathed a sigh of relief and walked on.

"Well?" she asked Harry. "Now what do we do?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. There's no way of opening these doors that I can see. Unless..." He looked at the snakes again. "Unless we need to use Parseltongue again."

"Worth a try." Luella drew her wand and was about to speak, when a scuffle behind her caught both their attentions.

They turned to see a fight in full swing. The sight of actually seeing the Chamber doors had obviously been too much for Lockhart, and his nerve had finally snapped. Somehow or other, he'd managed to get Ron's wand off him and was successfully using the boy as a human shield against a livid Rianne and Deanna.

"Let go of him!" yelled Deanna. "Or you *will* regret it!"

"Sorry, my dear, no can do." sighed Lockhart. "I've really got no intention of ending my days as snakefood, thank you very much. Awfully sorry about this, children, but you've left me no option. I shall have to cast Memory Charms on you all, take you all back, explain that I was too late to save the girl, and that you all lost your minds at the sight of her mangled remains." He leered at the furious Slytherins. "My apologies, dears. You've been.... *interesting*... to teach." He raised Ron's wand. "*Obliviate!*"

"No!" screamed Luella, suddenly realising what Lockhart had not. "The roof's unstable, you'll kill us all-"

She was too late. The wand exploded, sending Lockhart and Ron flying backwards, and causing the hex to misfire. It hit the landslide trap, dislodging one vital piece of stone. Before their very eyes, the entire roof caved in, tons of rock pouring out into the passageway, filling it up from floor to ceiling and causing Harry and Luella to fling themselves to the floor. Finally it stopped. The two teenagers looked up. The way back was blocked entirely. But that wasn't what upset Luella the most.

"Oh god." she whispered. "Oh my god. *DEANNA!*" she screamed, racing back to the landslide. "Deanna, talk to me, can you hear me, *are you alright?*"

"We're fine." came the muffled response. "Well, Ri, Ron and me are, anyway. Lockhart's not so good though. He got caught in the explosion and can't remember his own name."

"Name?" Lockhart's voice, stripped of all the false pretence and cowardice, actually sounded rather pleasant, if a little camp. "I have a name?" A pause. "What is it, dear girl?"

"Gilderoy, your name's Gilderoy." Ron could be heard telling him.

"Gilderoy? Are you sure?" Lockhart sounded rather dubious at this. "Not sure I like that at all. Sounds rather over the top, I must say. Are you sure I can't have something a little plainer?"

"Get this in writing, Rianne, it may not happen again." Ron said, sounding altogether happier than he had any right to be under the circumstances. Luella ignored them and turned her attention back to Deanna.

"Any way you can get through?" she called.

"I don't know." came the answer. "I think so, but it could take a while."

"We'll manage." Rianne interrupted. "Deanna and I aren't joint Slytherin House Jenga champions for no reason. We'll get through this. Are you and Harry OK?"

"We're fine." Harry answered. "Do you want us to dig from this end?"

"No!" shouted Deanna and Rianne together.

"No time!" snapped Rianne. "Ginny's in danger, every second wasted is one too many. Leave it too long and the Heir might kill her."

"She's right." came Deanna's voice, sounding unbearably sad. "You two'll have to go it alone."

"No." whispered Luella, realising with a jolt how much she'd been counting on having the others alongside her. "No, I can't do it alone, I need you guys with me!"

"I wish we were with you too." said Deanna. "But there it is, we're not. You've got Harry with you anyhow. Do what you can, we'll come through and join you as soon as we can. Is Harry there?"

"I'm here." called Harry.

"Great. Harry, listen. It's just you and Lu now. We'll do our best to get through and help you, but we don't guarantee anything. Stay on your guard, keep your wands with you, and *trust no one*." Deanna had never sounded so insistent before. "Ron, want to say anything?"

"Yeah." Ron's voice sounded strangely muffled despite the tons of rock in the way. "Just... good luck, Harry. You too, Luella. And... if it's too late... or if you can't save her..." there was a pause, where it seemed as if Ron was trying to maintain his composure, "don't blame yourselves."

Harry felt a lump building in his throat himself as Ron said this. "Thanks." he managed to stammer. He felt Luella tap him on the shoulder.

"Come on." she said gently. "We've got no time to lose." Final goodbyes were exchanged before the two remaining children approached the doors.

They came to a halt, the two snakes seeming to stare down at them somehow. Impulsively, Harry reached for Luella's hand and squeezed it. She returned the gesture.

"Well, Lu, looks like it's just you and me." he whispered.

Luella managed a smile. "Maybe it's for the best. After all the prophecy only mentioned you and me. This feels..." she groped for the right words, "right. Well, not right. But... *inevitable*."

Harry had to agree. He could practically feel the hand of Fate on his shoulder. He looked back at the doors. "Do you want to do it or shall I?"

"I opened the other entrance."

"But it's your Chamber."

"Tell you what," said Luella. "Let's do it together. On the count of three. One... two... three."

"*Open up*." they both said together. To their ears, it sounded no different to English. But it worked. The doors swung open to reveal a huge torchlit chamber, with twin rows of pillars holding up a gothic roof that wouldn't have looked out of place in any of Britain's cathedrals. In fact, the whole thing looked like a huge, evil cathedral to some dark deity best not named.

"Ready?" whispered Luella.

"Ready."

Holding hands, the two of them went in to face destiny.

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Their footsteps echoed around the Chamber, disrupting the silence. Harry kept looking around him, alert for the first sign of movement, but there was none. There was more life in a tomb than here. Harry fervently hoped that this place wouldn't end up as one. Still, there seemed to be no one here. No Heir. No Basilisk. No Ginny.

"Where are they?" Harry whispered.

"I don't know." Luella replied. "Keep looking."

Harry did, but still no sign of anyone.

"Are your Redeemer powers telling you anything?"

"Nothing concrete. My Mark's prickling, telling me to beware. But it's not telling me what or where the danger is."

"Your Mark?" Harry looked at Luella, and noticed for the first time the sign of the caduceus on her arm. "Where'd you get that?"

"It appeared when the Chamber first opened. It's the sign of Morgan Tal-y-Rhys, remember I told you about her?" Luella indicate the pillars, all of which had snakes wrapped around them. "It warns me of things sometimes. Burns whenever the Chamber opens, although when we did it, it only went warm, it didn't hurt."

"Wow." Harry whispered. He paused. "What's it saying now?"

"The Heir's around, I know that much. I can sense him, and I think he can sense me too." She looked around, worried. "No sign of him though. Deanna mentioned that this place had a statue of Salazar Slytherin at the end. Let's make for that."

"Deanna's been here?" asked Harry, his mind now really confused. "When?"

"In a dream." said Luella. "She nearly didn't make it back either. Hope we have better luck."

The conversation fell quiet after that. It didn't seem right to speak when it was so quiet. At length, the statue Luella had spoken of loomed into view. And curled up at its foot like some human sacrifice, was the black-clad, red-haired figure of Ginny Weasley. She wasn't moving.

"Ginny!" gasped Harry, breaking loose from Luella's grasp and racing to her side. "Are you OK?"

Ginny didn't answer. Turning her over, Harry saw that her eyes were closed. "Gin, wake up!" he urged her. "We've got to get out of here!"

Luella arrived next to him, helping him to lift Ginny into a sitting position. She felt for Ginny's pulse.

"Alive." she announced. "But only just. Dumbledore was right, we're only just in time." She shrieked suddenly, dropping Ginny and clasping her Mark. Harry laid Ginny back down and reached for his wand, which he'd left lying on the floor when he'd picked Ginny up. It wasn't there.

"My wand's gone!" he gasped.

"What do you mean, gone?" snapped Luella. "You had it when we came in, what've you done with it?"

"I don't know, I left it right here, I'm sure I did!" said Harry, frantically searching around for it, with no luck.

"Looking for something?" came a voice. Both Harry and Luella turned around.

Standing by a pillar, leaning up against it, was a tall, dark-haired, strangely attractive young boy of about sixteen, twirling Harry's wand in his hands. Harry recognised him at once.

"Tom!" he cried, relieved at the boy's familiar presence. He held out his hand for his wand. "Hey, thanks for finding it, I thought I'd lost it..." His voice trailed off as he realised Tom hadn't moved. "Tom?" he asked, starting to sense that all was not well.

"Harry," said Luella in a strangled voice, "do you know this man?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, he's the spirit of the diary, Tom Riddle. He showed me what happened the night they caught Hagrid. Tom, this is Luella, a friend of mine."

"I know." came the response. "And I think she knows who I am too."

Sure enough, Luella was getting to her feet, teeth gritted and wand at the ready.

"Stay back." she snarled. "Put the wand down, and stay well away from us."

Harry looked at her, perplexed. Why was Luella being so hostile? Tom had stopped the attacks first time around, surely he would help them now.

"What's up, Lu?" he asked. "Tom's on our side. He showed me what happened fifty years ago when the monster was loose last time."

"What, all of it?" smiled Luella thinly. "I doubt that very much."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, suddenly getting a sinking feeling that he didn't know the half of it.

Luella had by now turned her attention to Tom.

"Give it back to him." she said quietly. "Give the wand back, and get into that diary. Now."

"And if I don't?" Tom leered at her. "What will you do? Try your fancy little fairy tricks on me? They don't work on non-corporeal forms, girl. And on Basilisks, not at all. Not when eye contact with it will kill you before you can say a word."

"Basilisk?" Harry looked from one to the other. "How did you know..? Lu, what's going on here?" He could feel the panic rising up inside him. Something was terribly wrong, and he was beginning to suspect just what it was. He turned back to Tom. "Who are you?"

"A memory." smiled Tom, but there was no affection there. Nothing but sheer, cold, triumphant evil. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

"But whose memory?" asked Harry.

"You know who." smiled Tom, seeming highly amused at something Harry could only begin to fathom.

"I know." said Luella, stepping forward, wand in hand. "And it's time you went back to being just that... a memory. *Stupefy!*"

The Stunning Charm flew straight at Tom, who didn't even try to dodge it. Instead it just flew straight through him and into the far wall.

"You'll have to do better than that." Tom remarked. "Honestly, I'd expected a bit more of a challenge from the Second Heir. Morgan must be turning in her grave."

"Of course." sighed Luella. "He's got no separate physical existence so magic doesn't work on him. Stupid, Lu, stupid!" She smacked her forehead in annoyance at her own lack of foresight, before looking around and noticing the small black diary lying forgotten on the floor. The diary... In a flash it came to her. The only physical connection he had with the world was through that diary. So, maybe if she severed that connection somehow... Of course, she had no idea how. But anything was worth a try. Slowly, trying to be discreet, she aimed her wand at the diary.

"*Accio!*" The diary flew into her hands, causing Tom to clutch at his left forearm and scream in pain.

"Damn you!" he hissed, somehow managing to fight off the pain and point Harry's wand at her. "You'll pay for that, Redeemer! *Avada Kedavra!*"

Luella tried to dodge, cursing her luck. She was surely on the right track, and if she could just evade... But it was too late. The hex hit her full on, sending her flying back into the wall. Eyes closed, she slid to the ground and fell into a heap, face downwards, hair obscuring her features, collapsing without a sound. She didn't move.

"Lu..." Harry croaked, hoping beyond hope that she was OK, even as his instincts told him otherwise. He spun round to face Tom. "What have you done to her?" he yelled.

Tom just shrugged. "Such a shame, I'd preferred a bit more of a fight than that. I'd been told that the Slytherin Redeemer would prove more of a challenge. A formidable sorceress of great skill and power, so I was told. And she goes down at the first hurdle. What a waste. Ah well." He turned back to Harry with a flourish, taking a step forwards. "It was you I was interested in, anyway. No mystery about her, not if you know the prophecy. You, on the other hand..." His blue eyes fixed Harry with an unholy, almost hungry, look. "A mere baby, and yet you managed to bring down the Dark Lord. It is a puzzle most strange..." His voice trailed off as he approached Harry, those hungry eyes of his not leaving him for a moment as he reached out and trailed an almost solid finger down Harry's face.

"What do you want?" whispered Harry, shaking all over. He could feel tears pricking at his eyeballs, and yet he was determined not to cry. Besides, he could feel another emotion trying to get out, a wave of livid fury threatening to overcome him and send him going straight for Riddle's throat. "Who are you? And what does Lord Voldemort have to do with this?"

Tom fixed him with a penetrating stare. "Everything, Harry Potter. Everything." He lifted his wand - Harry's wand - and made his full name appear on the air in front of him, little golden letters spelling the words "TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE".

"Lord Voldemort," Tom said softly, very deliberately so that Harry could hear every word, "is my past, present and future. Observe." He tapped the letters, and Harry watched in awe and horror as they rearranged themselves into the dread words "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT".

Harry felt himself go numb, the truth suddenly blindingly obvious. Luella had known, must have done. Riddle was Voldemort, and must have been using the diary to attack students all along. Someone must have found the diary, written in it not realising who it had once belonged to and fallen under its spell. Harry looked once more at Ginny's prone form and realised who it must have been. Poor Ginny, alone in a hostile world, rejected and frightened, would have been easy prey for anyone offering a shoulder to cry on.

"You bastard," he whispered. "You complete and utter... As if attempted murder's not enough, you have to get some innocent young kid to do your dirty work for you!" he yelled at Tom. "You bastard!"

"Actually, my parents were married in a perfectly respectable church ceremony." Tom observed coolly. "And young Virginia's not that innocent." His smile turned into a leer that left Harry feeling sickened. "At least, not any more."

"You..." Harry whispered savagely, taking a step forward, clenching and unclenching his fists. He only just managed to control himself. "Let her go! You don't need her any more. You've got what you wanted, I'm at your mercy, Lu's..." he choked on the word, refusing to admit that she might be dead, "out of action, you don't need her! Just send her home. She's suffered enough."

"Not yet." said Tom smoothly. "I still need her for a little longer. Just long enough to take her life force and use it to help me take possession of your friend's body. I was

going to have yours, but I daresay hers will do as well. Now, while we're waiting, why don't you tell me how you managed to escape me eleven years ago? Avada Kedavra's never failed before."

Harry felt his knees go weak at the admission that the Avada Kedavra's sole intention was to kill and that, by implication, Luella wasn't coming back. No, no, no, was all he wanted to scream, and yet he didn't. He felt himself detaching, felt himself go into autopilot, and felt the words come through him rather than from him.

"It failed because of love. Because my mother loved me, and because she wouldn't give me up to save her life. She died defending me, and it meant you couldn't kill me. Because love is stronger than death, and it takes more than power or heritage to make a truly great wizard. Without love, you're nothing. *You* are nothing!" He spat the last sentence at him with a contempt stronger than any Basilisk's venom.

Tom blinked, clearly taken aback. But he regained himself, his face a contorted mask of fury.

"What did you say?" he hissed.

"You heard me." Harry heard himself say. "You're nothing! You're just a ghost in a diary, with no friends, no allies, no one who you haven't forced or tricked into helping you. Luella might be dead..." There it was. He'd finally forced himself to admit it, and yet it hadn't devastated him as much as he'd thought. Give it time though. When the adrenaline had worn off. "... but she was twice the witch you are. You can kill me if you like, but it won't change anything! You're still a pathetic excuse for a wizard, and you'll never be as good as Albus Dumbledore!"

Where had that come from? Harry wondered. He didn't know, and right now, had other things to think about. Tom had lifted the stolen wand in rage, preparing to fling a curse at Harry, but had halted in mid-hex, distracted by a flare of light at the far end of the Chamber.

Harry looked. What appeared to be a ball of fire had materialised at the end of the room and was flying towards them, accompanied by the most unearthly, spine-tingling music. For a split second, Harry wondered if perhaps Deanna, Ron and Rianne had managed to break through and were even now on the attack. However, any thought of reinforcements was dispelled as the fireball arrived on the scene, circled three times and came to land on Harry's shoulder, dropping a soft, triangular piece of cloth at his feet. It was Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix. And the thing he'd been carrying was the Sorting Hat.

Tom was shaking his head, smiling again. "So that's what Dumbledore sends his followers!" he laughed. "The old school Sorting Hat and a glorified songbird! Dear oh dear, what useless talismans you Gryffindors use. Salazar was rather more practical in his choice of gifts. As you are about to find out." He turned towards the statue, meeting its pitiless gaze with the arrogance of one sure of his destiny. "*Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!*"

Harry stumbled backwards as the statue's mouth opened. Fawkes took flight with a screech of alarm, circling around the eaves of the chamber. Don't leave me, Harry silently begged it. And yet, what use was a phoenix against the King of Serpents?

His impulse was to run, but he couldn't abandon Ginny to her fate. She was still alive, there might yet be hope. And besides, if he ran now, that was it. Tom would have won. Ginny would be doomed to having the life sucked out of her, Luella's body would be Tom's for the taking, and Lord Voldemort would be able to walk the earth again. No, he couldn't let that happen.

But he didn't know what else to do. And as a serpentine shape emerged out of the darkness, its deadly gaze flickering around the room before settling on Harry, all he could do was shut his eyes as a defence before turning and running, with the awful hissing of the Serpent King and the even more awful taunts of Tom Riddle ringing in his ears, daring him to turn and face them and in doing so, meet his end.

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Chapter Twenty Eight The Phoenix Effect

"Wake up."

The girl's voice nagged insistently at her, combining urgency and petulance in a way that only Marlie Lovegood had ever yet got away with.

"You must wake up."

Now it bore all the hallmarks of a command. Was this boot camp or something? Not even Caitlin was ever as authoritative as this.

"Why?" she muttered.

"There's danger out there!"

"So what," she muttered, wanting to go back to sleep. The bed she was tucked in was warm and comfortable, and she liked it here. She didn't want to move.

The other girl was having none of it.

"Wake up now!"

Luella's eyes flew open. She was awake, forced out of womblike oblivion into an all too real state of wakefulness. She rubbed her head, yawning. Something had hit her, she was sure of it, but she couldn't remember what. Felt like it had been a truck. Blinking, she looked about her.

She was in Marlie's bedroom. In a flash, her delirium cleared and she remembered what had happened. Riddle had hexed her in the Chamber of Secrets and she'd been knocked out. So why was she here, of all places?

"Am I dead?" she wondered out loud.

"No," came the girl's voice again. "But you had a very lucky escape."

Luella turned to face the speaker. "Marls?" she gasped. "Shouldn't you be Petrified?"

The girl turned to look at her with a faintly amused smile. Luella shrank back as she caught the girl's eyes. She was a dead ringer for Marlie... but with those jet black eyes there was no mistaking the two of them. This wasn't Marlie... and yet, they could have been sisters.

"She is," came the reply, followed by a girlish laugh. "But part of her's still very much at large. She may have mentioned me before now. I am Morticia."

"Morticia..." Enlightenment dawned as Luella recognised the name. "You're her dark twin, you live inside the necklace!" She looked around her. "I'm in the necklace?"

"Sort of," Morticia replied. "You became psychically linked to it the moment you put it on. And a very good thing you did too. If you hadn't been wearing it, that curse would have killed you."

"What?" gasped Luella. "But how... I mean, what... How am I still alive then?" she demanded.

Morticia sat back, all clinical detachment. "You are aware of the principle of inoculation."

"Of course I am, we did all the cowpox-smallpox vaccine thing back in primary school," snapped Luella.

"Good," smiled Morticia. "Then you can work out that this operates on the same kind of principle. Suffice it to say you were stunned but otherwise unharmed. But to work. We don't have much time. Harry still needs your help."

Luella realised with a start that Harry must still be in the Chamber, alone with Voldemort. "Oh my god, is he OK?"

"For now," replied Morticia. "But we need to help him - he won't manage it alone. And luckily for us, we have a secret weapon." She moved aside to reveal Marlie's plasma globe. It looked normal enough, except for one thing - the luminous plasma within was not its usual pinky-purple, but an angry and poisonous looking green.

"What happened to it?" gasped Luella. Morticia just smiled.

"It's our secret weapon. Kept safe until we're ready to use it. And now, my dear, it's time you went back," She raised Marlie's willow wand. "*Enervate!*"

The charm hit Luella, sending her flying out of Marlie's bed and towards the floor - except it wasn't there. Instead, there was this inky blackness, an endless tunnel into which she found herself falling headlong, tumbling head over heels, over and over and over again until...

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Until she hit solid earth with a nauseating thud and opened her eyes. She was awake again, back in the Chamber, and aching all over. She was going to have bruises down her back for days, she just knew it.

That's if she made it at all.

Leaning up on one elbow, trying to look inconspicuous, she glanced around the Chamber, searching for Tom and Harry. They weren't hard to spot. She bit her lip to stop herself screaming as she watched the Basilisk bear down on Harry, with what looked like a phoenix hovering around its eyes, which, she noticed, were streaming with blood and various other fluids. No danger there!

But she'd spoken too soon. The snake lunged towards the boy, teeth bared, blind but still poisonous. Harry, not flinching for a second, produced a sword which Luella couldn't even begin to imagine how he'd found, and thrust it straight into the Basilisk's throat.

The beast howled in pain as it collapsed, thrashing around for a few minutes before falling to the ground and lying still. Dead. Well, that was one menace out of the way. But Riddle was still there, and he was still armed with Harry's wand. And swords wouldn't work against him. Even now, he was stalking towards the boy, who was lying down as if exhausted, with the phoenix perched on his arm, almost as if it were watching over him.

Luella reached for her necklace, and noticed with a surprise that it was glowing bright green and moving of its own accord, as if it were struggling to get loose. She fingered the chain anxiously, hoping it wouldn't break. Morticia's voice hissed in her ear as she did so.

"Hurry up, I can't control this thing much longer! You know what to do!"

A memory surfaced, of Riddle hurling a curse at her and screaming *"Avada Kedavra!"* A curse accompanied by a silent rush of air and a horribly virulent green light. A green light exactly the same colour as the light coming from her necklace, that had been in the plasma globe.

Luella looked up and located the diary, lying a few feet away, where it had fallen as she'd slammed into the wall. Hoping that Tom would be too busy gloating over Harry to notice her, she pointed her wand at it and whispered *"Accio!"*

The diary slithered across the flagstones, into the waiting fingers of her right hand. But the use of magic had alerted Riddle, who turned from taunting Harry, clutching

his left forearm, his face clearly in agony. Good, about time he knew what it felt like, Luella couldn't help thinking.

"You!" he hissed, pain, fear and utter astonishment all over his face. "But you... you're dead... you must be! You have to be! Avada Kedavra's foolproof!"

"Yes," Luella smiled, getting to her feet and holding the diary high. "It is, isn't it?" Slowly, in a simple movement that seemed to take forever, she touched the tip of her wand to the necklace and felt the curse shoot into it. Now it was her wand that was glowing green and shaking uncontrollably. Luella gritted her teeth as she tried to hold on to it. It would never do for the wand to go flying out of her hand, not when she was so close to victory.

It seemed Fate was on her side. Concentrating every fibre of her being on the tip of her wand making contact with the diary, she tried to hold the wand still as she brought the diary slowly towards it, then tried to keep it from moving as the wand tip and book made contact, holding them together long enough for her to say the forbidden words.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The curse, finally free of its bonds, shot out of her wand and into the book with the force of a small explosion. Luella gasped as the diary flew out of her hand, and she found herself flying backwards again, propelled in the other direction by magic released in line with the laws of physics.

Tom dropped Harry's wand, convulsing in agony as he screamed a wordless cry of anger, hate, but mostly the sheer physical pain of the hex and his Mark burning. And then, after flickering for a bit, he was gone.

And then Harry was staggering to his feet, grabbing his wand and racing over to her, flinging his arms around her and gasping her name over and over again.

"Lu, you're OK, you're alive, you did it, oh Lu, thank god you're OK!"

Luella held him in her turn, scarcely able to believe it herself. Riddle was gone, truly gone. It had worked. She felt the necklace practically hum in jubilation, and her Mark was glowing fiercely, although not painfully so.

"I'm fine," she whispered. "We're all fine." She gazed into Harry's eyes, unable to stop smiling. He couldn't help himself either, despite being covered from head to toe in blood. She didn't want to think whose it might be.

"You killed the snake then," she said.

Harry nodded. "Yup. Thanks to Fawkes here." The phoenix fluttered down to land on Harry's shoulder, singing softly and nuzzling his ear.

"Yes, where did he come from?" Luella asked, remembering that Harry had acquired a sword from somewhere too. "And that sword?"

"He appeared after I called on Dumbledore," Harry explained. "Brought the Sorting Hat with him. He pecked out the eyes of the Basilisk so I could fight it, and when I put the Hat on and asked for help, it gave me a sword which I killed the Basilisk with."

"Dumbledore..." said Luella, remembering him telling he'd left magic of his own in the Chamber. "So that's what he meant!" she said happily. "He said he'd not been idle - now we know what he was up to."

They were interrupted by a noise from behind them. Harry let Luella go and spun round to face it, wand in one hand, sword in the other. Luella likewise retrieved her own wand from where it had fallen and turned to see.

It was Ginny, sitting upright and rubbing her eyes, looking about her, clearly terrified. As soon as she saw Harry and Luella with their wands drawn and a sword pointed at her, she burst into tears.

"I'm... I'm sorry!" she bawled. "I didn't mean to... to hurt those students! I didn't want to do it, but he - he made me! It was the diary, Lu, it's alive, it's evil, it took me over, made me do things, made me hurt Marlie and Hermione. Don't hurt me, please, I'm sorry!" She dissolved into incoherent sobs. Luella put her wand away and went straight to her, hugging the crying girl.

"Ssh, don't cry, it's alright," Luella tried to soothe her. "I know, I know all about it, I know what was going on. It's alright, you're OK, it's over."

Ginny cried even harder. "I'm so sorry!" she wept. "I wanted to tell someone, I really did, but I was so afraid they'd think I did it deliberately, and... and I was scared of what Tom might do to me... and then..." she swallowed, "then they expelled you, and I really was terrified and..." She stopped, unable to go on. Luella stroked her hair tenderly.

"Gin, don't worry. I don't blame you for that!" Luella told her. She gazed at the girl with kindness. "Voldie's evil, he's capable of anything. You were vulnerable anyway, you weren't to know. But Gin, promise me, next time anything like that happens, that you will tell someone! You could have gone to Snape, he knows his stuff, and as soon as he saw that diary, he would have known in a second what was happening. Go to him if you can, but if you can't, and you can't or won't go to your parents, or Ron, or Dumbledore or anyone else, come and find me or Marls or Deanna or Ri. We'll help you. Promise."

Ginny nodded mutely. "Thanks. I will," she whispered.

"Good. And another thing," Here Luella became rather sterner. "Don't nick our stuff again."

Ginny had the grace to look away guiltily. "Sorry," she whispered. "That was wrong, I know. But I didn't know what else to do! I was so scared you'd find out how to work it and know it was me."

"Yeah, and I already told you we'd give you the benefit of the doubt," sighed Luella. "Just... don't do it again! Talk to us! Deanna recognised the name immediately, she knew it was Voldemort's diary, no way would she have blamed you for anything it did."

"No," said Harry, joining in. "She wouldn't. And neither would I."

Ginny looked from one to the other for a brief moment then burst into tears again. This time however, it was out of relief. Luella didn't say anything more, she just held the girl tightly, letting her cry. Harry, not wanting to be left out and feeling in need of comforting himself, laid down his sword, put his wand away and joined the hug, putting his arms around both girls, who broke apart their own embrace to allow him to join in.

They'd been like that for what seemed like forever when their silent communion was broken by the sound of footsteps rushing towards them.

Deanna, Ron and Rianne had managed to dig through and were racing towards them, wands out and cloaks flying behind them.

"Lu! Are you OK?" cried Deanna as she skidded to a halt beside them.

"I'm fine," Luella nodded weakly as Deanna flung her arms round her. "I'm fine, mate."

"Ginny!" yelled Ron, looking as if he was about to cry from sheer relief. "You're alright!" He made to hug his baby sister, but she held him off, unable to meet his eyes.

"Gin?" Ron asked, perplexed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Ginny just shook her head, unable to admit to Ron, of all people, what her part in it had been.

Rianne was busy looking around the Chamber. "So what happened then? This place looks like a reptilian abattoir." She indicated the remains of the Basilisk, covered in its own blood and stretched out across most of the width of the Chamber.

Ron also glanced around. "Hey, where's the Heir?" he asked, surprised. "I don't see a body anywhere."

Harry got up and retrieved the diary. "Here," he said woodenly, all emotion drained after the Basilisk fight.

Ron took the diary. "What, this?" he asked, confused. "A book? Heir of Slytherin? No way."

"Don't be too sure," Harry cautioned him. "Weren't you the one who told me that books could be dangerous? Turns out this one trumps the lot."

"It does?" Ron stared. "But... Riddle stopped the attacks last time, didn't he?"

"Yeah," said Luella. "Because he was the one who started them."

"What?" Ron's eyes bulged. "So... Hagrid's innocent?"

Luella and Harry both nodded.

"So... who was Riddle then?" Ron asked, scratching his head. "Because if he was that powerful, surely we'd have all heard of him."

"You have," Deanna told him. "Voldemort."

"What?!" Ron shrieked. "Tyler, you're kidding!"

Harry shook his head. "We're not. Look," He trailed his wand through the air, causing Riddle's full name to appear before them. Then, a tap of the wand caused them all to rearrange themselves into their evil anagram.

The others, including Luella who hadn't seen this earlier, all stared in varying degrees of astonishment. It was Rianne who finally broke the silence.

"Great," she sighed, with a hint of annoyance. "Not only is he a power hungry, ruthless, homicidal sadist, but he's also an anagram nerd," She shook her head. "Disturbing."

"And he was in that diary all along," Ron went pale, and dropped the diary as if he'd just found out it was radioactive. "Oh my god, Harry, we had that diary at one point. You were writing in it, talking to it... and it was You-Know-Who all along."

"If you think that's bad," Luella interrupted, "spare a thought for the poor, innocent youngster who happened upon the diary in the first place, didn't know what it was, starting writing to it and got taken over by him and made to do the attacks."

"Gods, yeah, poor thing," Ron said, sombre for once. "That must have been awful for them. Who was it? Anyone I know?"

All eyes turned to Ginny. Seeing that the game was up, Ginny swallowed and finally gathered her courage.

"Ron. Oh Ron," she choked. "It was me, Ron. I was the one attacking everyone. I didn't even know I was doing it at first, couldn't remember a thing. By the time I did, it was too late, Tom told me if I said anything I'd get in trouble, that no one would believe me, and that it might be someone I knew who was next..." Ginny choked on the words, hardly daring to see what Ron's reaction to all this was. "Ron, I'm so sorry, I really am!" She was in tears again, sobbing her heart out, convinced that this was it, that the reconciliation she'd managed to build with her brother must surely be lying in ruins at her feet by now.

With good reason. Ron was staring at her, unable to believe what he was hearing. All the colour had drained out of his face, and he looked like he was about to hit someone. Hard.

"It was you?" he whispered.

Ginny nodded, unable to say anything more.

"You Know Who... was using my baby sister... to try and kill people?"

Again, Ginny could only nod.

"The absolute bastard!" shouted Ron, his voice raising to a peak. "The complete and utter git!" He snatched the diary up and threw it at the nearest pillar before turning back to Ginny and, to everyone's surprise, not least Ginny's, flung his arms around her and gave her the biggest hug she'd had that evening, almost squeezing the life out of her in the process. "Ginny, ssh, don't cry, it's alright, it's over, you're safe, I'm here, don't worry, sis."

"Oh Ron!" Ginny sobbed. "I was so scared! I didn't know what to do." She looked up at him, tears still glistening on her cheeks. "I'm really sorry. If... if you want to disown me again... I won't mind."

"Disown you?" Ron shook his head, gazing at her with the big brother tenderness that was always there deep down, had always been there, but didn't always know how to show itself. "After what you've been through? No way, Gin. Absolutely no way. Don't blame yourself, sis. It wasn't your fault. It's his... You Know Who's. I mean, the bastard!" Ron spat. "How dare he do that to my little sister!" He glared at the diary. "When I get my hands on him... Harry, permission to rip the pages out one by one and chuck this thing in the nearest fire so I can send the bastard back to Hades where he belongs!"

"With pleasure..." Harry started to say, but found himself interrupted by Luella, who Summoned the diary back with a flick of her wand and pocketed it.

"Sorry, Ron, but I need this as evidence. I've got an expulsion to overturn. Anyway," and here she allowed herself to smile, "it won't do any good. Riddle's already on his way there. And if there's any justice in the world, he'll find himself spending his down time being possessed by a member of the Salvation Army and obliged to help little old ladies cross the road for all eternity."

They all laughed at that, even Ginny, who, reassured that Ron wasn't about to start calling for her expulsion, was almost back to normal again.

"Now there's an image," grinned Rianne. "Say, you never did tell us how you managed it. And where on earth did that phoenix come from?" She indicated Fawkes, who was perched on Deanna's shoulder, nibbling her ear and generally doing his best to irritate her. Deanna, long used to the ways of birds, was ignoring him in favour of the sword with which Harry had killed the Basilisk.

"Never mind the phoenix, where'd you get this?" Deanna asked, not taking her eyes off it for a minute. "This is a serious bit of fighting kit! Looks turn of the millennium to me," She sighed mistily. "A Golden Age in weaponcrafting. They don't make them like that any more."

"Oh god. Here we go," muttered Rianne. "She's off into weapon geek mode," She got to her feet. "Right! Come on everybody! We're going home! Lu and Harry can fill us in on the way. Ron, go and fetch Lockhart."

"No need," said Ron as Rianne started hauling the others to their feet. "Here he comes."

Sure enough, Lockhart was ambling towards them, beaming as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Hello!" he cooed. "Is it safe in here yet?"

"Perfectly," Rianne smiled at him. "Lu and Harry got rid of the big, nasty snake, it's all clear."

"Did they?" Lockhart asked. "That's nice of them," A pause. "Who are Lu and Harry exactly?"

"How rude of me!" Rianne led him over to where Luella and Harry were watching Lockhart with a fascination verging on morbidity. "This young lady is Luella, and the young man with her is Harry. Lu, Harry, this is Gilderoy Lockhart, or Martha, as he's now decided to be called."

"Martha?" Luella and Harry stared incredulously at her, before looking at each other and sniggering. Finally, Luella composed herself enough to ask the inevitable question.

"Why Martha?"

"Oh well, you know," Lockhart indicated with a flourish, "Rianne here told me my name was Gilderoy, but it's such an over the top sort of name, I decided it didn't really suit me."

"You don't say?" murmured Harry under his breath. Luella said nothing, just giving Rianne a look that said 'Is he for real?' Rianne nodded, as if to say 'Not my idea!'

"So I chose Martha," Lockhart continued, oblivious to the looks the others were giving him. "Nice, simple, homespun name. Much better, I think. Don't you?"

"Oh yes. Yes of course," said Luella. "But, er, forgive me for saying this but... isn't Martha a girl's name?"

"It is?" Lockhart's face fell. He looked down at himself. "Oh darn. And I so liked the name too," He looked up, suddenly thoughtful. "Rianne, my dear, is there a way I could, you know, become a woman? I mean, I'm not really one for the usual lad pursuits, never been one for Quidditch or beer or anything like that. And shopping and dresses and make-up sound like such fun! Could I? Could I give it a try? Please?"

Rianne gave the matter some thought. "Well, there's an operation you could have, but it's not reversible. Otherwise I could look into Sex Change Potions, I know they exist.

But for now, why don't you just dress as a woman and call yourself Martha? See how you like it before committing yourself."

Lockhart clapped his hands with delight. "That would mean the world to me! Would you help me? Help me pick some clothes, show me what I need to do?"

Rianne patted his arm comfortingly. "Of course I will," She turned back to Harry and Luella, practically glowing. "Isn't he just the cutest? Know what? I hope they don't restore his memory, because I'm really rather fond of him like this."

They both had to agree. Transvestite Lockhart was better than Arrogant and Overbearing Lockhart any day.

"Martha?" Harry whispered to Luella as they began to follow the others out.

"Hey, if it makes him happy," Luella shrugged. She came to a halt. "Hang on, Harry. There's just one last thing I want to do," Leaving the others, she turned and walked over to where the dead Basilisk was lying, no longer a thing of fear, or even of hate. Instead, it just looked rather pathetic. Harry followed Luella as she knelt down by its side, stroking the giant head as if it were a beloved pet.

"Poor thing," sighed Luella. "Never had a chance really, did it? Destined to live a prisoner here in the Chamber, never getting out unless someone wanted it to kill for them, and eventually dying impaled on someone else's sword. You know, it's as much a victim as Ginny was, in a way."

Harry could only shake his head in wonder. He never could figure out how Luella could feel sorry for the strangest of people, or indeed, monsters.

"Lu, it's evil to the core. You never heard it talk. It liked killing."

"I know," Luella said, sadness there for all to see. "But it couldn't help its nature. And it's not its fault that it got stuck here in a school full of people rather than somewhere out in a remote jungle where it could hunt to its heart's content," She turned to look at Harry, this strange, bittersweet smile on her face. "See, this is why you're needed. I could never have killed it, you know. I'm too compassionate sometimes. Not ruthless enough when it counts," She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you."

"Hey," Harry told her. "Don't be like that. For what it's worth, I rather like you being compassionate. It's rather... sweet," He suddenly realised what he'd said, and immediately started blushing. "But that's probably a deadly insult to a Slytherin, so I'll shut up now."

"Good move," Luella replied as she got to her feet. "It is the worst thing you can call a Slytherin," She hesitated, before smiling. "But just this once, I won't mind."

Harry smiled back. He couldn't help it. It was infectious like that. This must be what Fred and George jokingly referred to as a "moment". Except now, he could suddenly see the serious side to it. This must be what happiness was, pure, unsullied joy.

Which was promptly broken by Deanna calling them over.

"When you two lovebirds have finished trying to read your future in the snake entrails, can we please get a move on? We haven't got all night!"

"Thought it was goose entrails?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, but they're Parselmouths, it's probably different for them. Well? You two coming or what?"

"Yeah, alright," yawned Harry, suddenly aware of how tired he was. "Coming, Lu?"

Luella gave the Basilisk one last sorrowful glance. "I'm sorry," she whispered to it, before turning and taking Harry by the hand. "Let's go."

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Chapter Twenty Nine The Tying Up of Loose Ends

The journey back to the school was fairly uneventful. Fawkes was able to carry them back up the pipe to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and a few words from Luella closed up the entrance to the Chamber, hiding it away as if it had never been.

Rianne volunteered to take Lockhart to the hospital wing.

"After all," she said, "he's going to be of no use whatsoever to the debriefing, so we might as well get him out of the way."

The others unanimously agreed. After all, there were still teachers wandering around school on patrol, and there was no one better at being able to talk her way out of a sticky situation than Rianne. And so, with Rianne and Lockhart heading off in one direction, Luella, Deanna, Harry, Ron and Ginny took off in the other, following Fawkes as he led them through the dungeons towards Snape's office.

The door proved to be ajar as they approached it. Inside, they could see the fire on, and Professor Snape pouring cups of tea. Seated next to the fire were Ron and Ginny's parents. Mrs. Weasley had her head in her hands, sobbing. Mr. Weasley wasn't crying, but he seemed no less distraught. He was clutching on to Snape's sleeve with an almost plaintive sound to his voice.

"I must say, Professor, from what my sons have said about you, I always thought you were the cold and unsympathetic type, but you've been amazing throughout all this, an absolute rock..."

"I do try, Mr. Weasley. Your daughter was one of my brightest and best students, very popular, a credit to her house. It's deeply affected all of us, myself included. We will all miss her."

"My poor baby!" sobbed Mrs. Weasley. "My little girl! How could anyone do such a thing to her? My poor, poor child!"

Ginny, on hearing all this, couldn't stand it any more. Breaking loose from Ron, she raced into the office.

"It's alright, Mum, here I am!" she shouted. "I'm OK!"

Mrs. Weasley looked up, hardly daring to believe her ears. But it was true enough. Ginny really was there, in one piece, healthy and alive.

"Ginny!" she cried, sweeping her daughter up in her arms. Mr. Weasley soon joined her and all three of them engaged in a group hug.

Snape, by contrast, didn't bat an eyelid. He merely lowered the antique silver teapot and turned to look at the other children now pouring into the room. He looked them all up and down in wonder, taking in the slime, dirt, dust, grime, snake blood and various other substances best not mentioned covering them all liberally.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but... what have you been doing?" He noticed Luella standing there. "Miss Martin, shouldn't you be at home? I don't want your parents up here as well."

"It's alright, Severus," The children all turned to stare as Albus Dumbledore stepped into view, a broad smile on his face. Fawkes immediately flew over to him, singing for joy. "I told Caitlin where she was. She wasn't particularly pleased, but she did go and make up an excuse to keep the Martins from worrying."

"I'm not surprised Caitlin was upset," Snape remarked. "You encouraged Luella to come up here and expose herself to mortal danger? You do take some risks sometimes, Albus."

"True enough," chuckled Dumbledore. "But in this case, I think it was one that needed to be taken." He turned to face the astonished children. "So how did you do it then? Taking on a full grown Basilisk and Lord Voldemort is no mean feat, even for five talented youngsters such as yourselves."

"You-Know-Who?" gasped Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley clutched on to Ginny even tighter.

"But... how could it have been him?" Mr. Weasley asked, incredulous. "He's hiding out in Albania, isn't he? Completely powerless and unable to influence anything, that's what you and Melissa told me."

"That, Arthur, is a very interesting question," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Does anyone here have any answers?"

Luella turned to her friends for advice. All of them were looking at her as if to say 'go on'. Looking away, her eyes fell on Ginny. The girl was looking back at her, wide-eyed and frightened, but also with a sense of resignation. Luella felt sorry for her, but

there was no help for it. They'd have to know sooner or later what Ginny had done, and better it happened now.

Turning back to Dumbledore, she produced the diary. "It was this, sir," She passed it over to him. "It's Voldemort's old school diary. Someone found it and didn't know what it was, started writing in it and got taken over by it. Voldemort used them to carry out the attacks for him."

Dumbledore flicked through the diary. "Most ingenious. Of course, Riddle always was a most talented student. Such a waste, that he had to turn to the Dark Arts," he sighed. "He could have been such a powerful force for good." He laid the diary down. "So which student was it? Did you find them?"

Luella glanced over at Ginny. Seeing that the game was up, Ginny finally gathered her courage and confessed.

"Please sir. It was me," she whispered. "I found it in with my school books when we got back from Diagon Alley. I didn't know it was You-Know-Who's or I'd never have touched it! I started writing in it, and it wrote back, and I thought it was my friend at first, but it wasn't, and by the time I realised it, it was too late..." Ginny faltered, withering under the looks her parents were giving her.

"Ginny!" gasped Mrs. Weasley, releasing her daughter at once and staring at her in horror. "How could you? What were you thinking of?"

"I'm sorry, Mum!" Ginny pleaded. "I didn't know! Didn't know what was happening to me! Didn't realise it was the diary until it was too late!"

"Ginny, what have we always told you?" sighed Mr. Weasley in exasperation. "Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain! Why didn't you show it to us sooner? It's clearly full of Dark magic!"

"I didn't think!" Ginny cried. "It was in one of my textbooks, I thought someone had just left it in there, I thought it was OK! And when I found out it wasn't, I was too scared to tell anyone. It told me that if I went to a teacher or you, that no one would believe me, or that it'd hurt Ron..." Ginny stopped talking, not trusting herself not to cry again.

She needn't have worried. Mrs. Weasley, on hearing that it had threatened Ron too, immediately forgave Ginny and swept her into a hug. "My poor child," she whispered. "My poor, dear child." Ginny peered out at Dumbledore, still trembling with fright. "I'm not expelled, am I?" she whispered.

Dumbledore gazed back tenderly. "No, of course not. There will be no punishment. Wiser witches and wizards than you have been tricked by Lord Voldemort," This was said with a sidelong glance at Snape, who averted his eyes and gazed into the fire. Dumbledore looked away again, this time looking at Luella. "However, Miss Weasley's confession does have one consequence. It means that you, Miss Martin, are completely in the clear."

These words were met with general cheering and rejoicing from the children, as Luella found herself being mobbed by Deanna and Harry, with even Ron cheering and patting her on the shoulder.

"Of course," said Dumbledore as the general hubbub died down, "Miss Weasley will have to give a formal statement to the governors. However, we don't envisage them calling for any punishment themselves, not if Professor Snape and myself speak in her favour. Certainly not at present. When they heard that she'd been captured, they all, with one noted exception, begged me to return. So here I am."

"All's well that ends well, then," Snape remarked. "Miss Weasley's safe, Miss Martin's reinstated pending the formalities, and the attacks have been halted for good. Just one thing remains," Here he gave Luella a rather curious smile. "You never did tell us how you managed it all."

"Yes, there's a mystery," Dumbledore observed. "How did you succeed where your elders did not?" He waved his wand and conjured chairs for them all, indicating for them to sit down. They all did so and, starting from the very beginning of the year, revealed the entire story to an amazed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, a very impressed Professor Snape and a not altogether surprised Dumbledore, although even he looked horrified when Harry told them how he'd been bitten by the Basilisk but survived thanks to Fawkes's tears.

Finally, the tale came to an end, with Luella explaining how she'd been able to come back from Avada Kedavra and use Riddle's own spell against him, this last feat being met with astonishment from all sides.

"You were hit by Avada Kedavra... and survived?" whispered Snape, stunned. "But how?"

"I don't know," Luella admitted. "But I think it has something to do with this." She removed Marlie's necklace and handed it over to him.

Snape examined carefully, holding it up to the light. "Miss Lovegood's necklace," he murmured. "I remember. She obtained it from her own brush with death four years ago. I always wondered if there was more to it than meets the eye," He passed it to Dumbledore. "What do you think, Albus?"

Dumbledore took it with a smile. "I always knew it would prove its worth. I said at the time it would prove a powerful protective talisman, did I not, Miss Tyler?"

Deanna nodded. "You did indeed. Told me I should make sure Marlie looked after it. Didn't know it could block the Killing Curse though!"

"It didn't block it," Luella interrupted. "It stored it and sent it back. Apparently Marlie's shadow side inhabits it - she told me it worked on the principle of inoculation."

At these words, Dumbledore suddenly nodded in recognition. "Ah, of course! I think I see. Miss Tyler, kindly reacquaint us with the closing events of Miss Lovegood's coma."

Deanna cast her memory back four years. "Well, I won't go into any great detail here, but basically, it was a struggle between Marlie and her dark twin for control of her soul, and the final battle took place in this underground cavern that must have been the Chamber of Secrets. Her dark twin, Morticia, called up Lord Voldemort to fight us both, and he summoned this Basilisk. It got me, but Marlie avoided it. Then Voldemort double-crossed Morticia by sending it after her. Marlie saved her from it, and the two of them decided to join forces. Together, they banished him from her mind, and Marlie woke up, holding this Golden Snitch in her hand, which later got made into that necklace."

Dumbledore smiled, as if his theory had just been confirmed. "So in other words, after uniting her whole mind against Voldemort and banishing him utterly, she was rewarded with this necklace. Is it apparent yet what its power is?"

They all thought hard. Luella thought back to her own meeting with Morticia. It worked on the principle of vaccination, she had said. Could she have meant...?

"Is it immune to Lord Voldemort?" she asked, hoping that didn't sound as stupid to Dumbledore as it did to her.

To her surprise, Dumbledore's smile widened and he clapped his hands.

"That's it exactly!" he laughed. "Marlene Lovegood turned down Voldemort, truly turned him down with literally all her heart and soul. That is rare indeed, for in most people there is always a dark side that can be easily manipulated. Of course, there are those who learn the hard way, but rarely is it done so young and with so little pain and heartache. At age twelve, Marlene Lovegood was tempted, almost gave in... and yet successfully resisted. As a result, he can never influence her again. And while wearing that necklace, none of his magic will work against her. Which is what saved you, Miss Martin."

"Really?" Luella stared at the necklace again, deceptively innocent-appearing as it dangled from Dumbledore's fingers. "Wow."

"You mean that necklace is an Anti-You-Know-Who Talisman," Ron whispered. "Cool! Hey, Harry, maybe you'd better have it. You're the one he's always after."

"When all's said and done," Deanna interrupted, "it happens to be Marlie's. You want one, you knock back some Sleeping Death and get your own."

Ron frowned, something else occurring to him. "There's one thing I don't get though. If it guards against You-Know-Who, how come Marlie got Petrified?"

"Because it wasn't him, was it?" Deanna snapped. "It was his Basilisk. Only guards against something Voldie does, not his pets and minions."

"Yes," Ron persisted, "but he was commanding the Basilisk, wasn't he? If he's using magic to control someone, logically speaking, their actions won't affect the necklace wearer either, will they?"

"He wasn't using magic," said Luella firmly. "He was using Parseltongue. It allows you to talk to snakes, but they won't necessarily obey you. Will they, Harry?"

"It's true," Harry confirmed. "That snake at the Duelling Club only backed down because I shouted and because it didn't fancy its chances in a fight. A Basilisk doesn't have to obey unless it wants to, and when I heard it talking, it seemed quite keen on the idea of killing people. I think it acted of its own free will in helping Riddle."

"Suppose so," said Ron thoughtfully. "Obviously that necklace isn't perfect. But it's still a useful thing to have around."

"Indeed," remarked Snape. "And while we are on the subject of Miss Lovegood, the Restorative Draught is virtually ready. We'll have her back in person tomorrow."

This was met with yet more cheering, as Harry and Ron had realised that this meant Hermione too would be with them again.

"Wait until Hermione hears about all this!" yelled Ron. "She'll be chuffed to bits that she was right about the Basilisk," His face fell just as quickly. "Oh gods, Harry, she'll be unbearable."

"You'll be glad to have her back really," Harry told him.

"Yeah... suppose," sighed Ron.

"Yay, Marlie's coming back!" enthused Deanna. "She's going to be so relieved it's all over, especially when she hears her necklace saved Lu's life. Although she'll be rather upset at having missed all the action."

"Knowing Marlie, she won't mind that," Luella commented. "She got to face down Riddle and the Basilisk and survived, and her necklace saved the day. That'll be enough for her," She started to smile. "Especially when she finds out that joining us would have ruined her outfit." Everyone laughed at that. It was true, Marlie would have never recovered from the trauma.

Happiest of all was Ginny. "It's over, it's over!" she whispered ecstatically. "Everything's going to be OK! It's over!" She looked like she was going to collapse with relief.

"Yes, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley soothed her. "It's all over. Everything's going to be just fine," She looked up, a thought occurring to her. "Albus, if Ginny's been under the influence of this diary since August, that would mean this Tom Riddle was already affecting her when she was Sorted, isn't that right?"

"Quite probably, Molly, although the exact degree of influence is impossible to state," Dumbledore replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because every single member of our family, except for a few distant Hufflepuff cousins and that rather strange Squib relative of mine who ran away to become an accountant, has been Gryffindor for generations. And yet Ginny's not. Is it stretching the bounds of possibility that perhaps that was down to Riddle influencing her?"

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged glances.

"Well, Severus? What do you think? You know Slytherin better than I do."

"It's possible," shrugged Snape. "But once Sorted, you're not allowed to change Houses. The Sorting, once done, cannot be reversed."

Mrs. Weasley was not to be put off. "Yes, but what if the Sorting was flawed? That is, what if it's not a true reflection of her personality? I mean, if she was under the influence of a noted Slytherin, and we are all agreed that she could well have been, doesn't that skew the result? What if she's really a Gryffindor deep down?" There was an almost fanatical fervour to Mrs. Weasley, as if she were desperate to have Ginny back in the family fold in every way. Luella began to realise who Ron took after.

However, there was more than a hint of Weasley stubbornness in Ginny too.

"But Mum, I can't change Houses!" Ginny gasped, aghast at the prospect. "All my friends are in Slytherin! I like being there! If I change Houses, they'll never speak to me again!"

Mrs. Weasley held her ground. "Ginny, love, you might have felt at home there before, but now you're not enchanted, you're not the same person, are you? It won't be long before you start wishing you were back with your brothers again."

"I don't want to be with my brothers!" Ginny fumed. "I want to be with Lydia, and Autumn, and Marlie, and Deanna, and Rianne, and Lu! I want to spend my evenings playing Jenga, and listening to Muggle pop tunes on the stereo! Marlie's working on a TV and video over the summer, we could have films and TV programmes before long! I don't want to get stuck in Gryffindor!"

"Ginny!" snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Stop sulking! There is nothing wrong with Gryffindor House, and if that's your true House then there you will go!"

"It's not my true House!" Ginny yelled, by now stamping her feet in full adolescent stropiness. "I want to stay in Slytherin!"

Mrs. Weasley looked horrified. "Ginny, you surely don't want to be in, well, that house after all that's happened this year, do you?"

"Yes!" Ginny stormed.

Mrs. Weasley looked as if she were about to faint. Giving up on her daughter, she appealed to her husband. "Arthur, do something!"

Mr. Weasley started fidgeting nervously, caught between wanting to please his daughter and yet avoid getting into an argument with his wife. "Ah, er, um, Ginny dear, if that's where you'd be best suited, then maybe you should transfer to Gryffindor..." He noticed the way his daughter was glaring at him, and decided that now was a good time to pass the buck. "But maybe we should ask your teachers what they think," He turned hopefully to Professor Snape. "What do you think, Professor?"

"I must say, Ginny's settled into Slytherin very well," Snape remarked. "It would be a shame to disrupt her schooling now, after a whole year. What do you say, Albus?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "A student transferring from one House to another isn't common, I grant you, but it's not unheard of. However, I think that what would be best is for us to consider Ginny's true personality and to which House she is most suited. And there is only one person who can give us an unbiased opinion in that respect. Harry?"

Harry looked up, startled. "What?" he stammered. "I don't have to choose, do I?" He found himself faced with the horrible vision of never being allowed within sight of the Weasley house ever again.

"No, of course not," Dumbledore smiled. "All I need from you is the Sorting Hat which you're still clutching on to."

"Oh!" Harry felt himself going red. "Here you go, sir," He handed the Hat back to Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore took the hat from him. "Now, Miss Weasley, if you'd like to come here and take a seat?" He conjured a chair for her, and indicated for her to sit down before turning to her parents. "Now, Molly. What I propose is for Ginny to try on the Hat again, now that Riddle is truly gone and she is herself once more. What the Hat sees in her will be her true personality, unclouded by any form of enchantment, and thus, lead to her being assigned to her true House. Is this agreeable to you?"

Mrs. Weasley nodded. "I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Very good. And will you agree to abide by the Hat's decision, even if it is not what you yourself would have chosen?"

Mrs. Weasley closed her eyes, seemingly in pain. An eternity seemed to pass by. Everyone held their breath in anticipation. Would she agree?

Finally she opened her eyes again. "Very well," she sighed. "If it's where she'd be happiest. At least she's alive and well, and if she does get sorted into Slytherin again, at least nothing will have changed."

"Thank you, Molly," Dumbledore turned to Ginny. "What about you, Miss Weasley? Will you abide by the Hat's decision even if you don't like it?"

Ginny nodded. "If it gets Mum off my back."

Dumbledore laughed. "How very pragmatic of you. Maybe you won't have to worry after all. But now. Let us Sort you properly," Lifting the Hat, he held it above Ginny's head before slowly lowering it onto her as if she were a queen being crowned. Ginny looked pensive, but she was clutching her chair with a fierce determination that whatever happened, she would not allow herself to be frightened by it. And so Dumbledore released the Hat, and she disappeared under it.

Once more, it shut out the outside world as firmly as a brick wall. Ginny felt her tension melt away as the now familiar womblike interior of the Hat blocked out her senses, leaving her in her own little world. Alone... except for the voice of the Hat.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Ginny Weasley again. What can I do for you then?"

I need re-Sorting, she told it.

"What??" The Hat seemed outraged that its professional judgement was being called into question. *"What's wrong, was I not good enough last time? I'm not changing your House now, just because you don't like it."*

I do like it, I really do, Ginny hastily reassured it. *But you see, I was kind of possessed by this evil Slytherin at my first Sorting, and my mum thinks it might have had an effect on things. Can you tell me where I'm really meant to be?*

The Hat still seemed rather put out. *"This is most unorthodox."*

I know, I know, but she's really getting me down. Can you just reSort me once and for all? It was Dumbledore's idea, not mine.

"Oh very well. Sit tight and I'll have a look inside."

Ginny waited while the Hat had a look at her. She could almost feel it poking around inside, looking around her mind. Eventually, it spoke to her again.

"To be honest with you, Miss Weasley, there's not a lot of difference, except you seem rather more world-weary this time around. So I suppose the burning question is, what do you want?"

What do I want? Ginny wondered. A very good question. She wasn't sure herself. But there was one thing she did know.

I want to be myself, she thought. I don't want to be a carbon copy of my mum. I don't want to tag along after my brothers. I want to be me. Ginny Weasley.

"Your mother was a Gryffindor."

Yes.

"She wants that for you too?"

Ginny paused. Then...

Yes.

"But you're not so sure."

Oh, I'm sure alright. Sure that I don't want her telling me what to do! seethed Ginny. It's my life that's going to be hugely disrupted if I have to change to Gryffindor or anywhere else, not hers! She's just upset that we're not all one big, happy, picture-perfect, identical family and she doesn't care how upset I'll be if I have to pretend to be like all the others!

"You want to stay in Slytherin."

Yes! thought Ginny, a lump in her throat. *My friends are there, I'm happy there! This year in Slytherin's been great, well, when I wasn't being possessed by a haunted and demonic diary anyway. I don't want to leave!*

"Looks like you already know where you really belong, doesn't it?"

Ginny nodded, a tear in her eye.

Yes. Yes, I do.

"Then far be it for me to prevent you from being happy. Your true calling is SLYTHERIN!"

Ginny whipped the Hat off and squealed with delight. Deanna and Luella leapt to their feet and rushed towards her, flinging their arms round her and jumping up and down, yelling and screaming.

"A win, a win, for Slytherin!" chanted Deanna. She gave Ginny a pat on the shoulder before proclaiming to the entire room, "Our doing, this! Me and Rianne, we taught her everything she knows about being Slyth!"

Luella glanced at Mrs. Weasley, who looked rather less pleased. She reached out to caution her friend.

"I wouldn't say stuff like that if I were you, Deanna. Mrs. Weasley looks like she's about to kill you."

Deanna looked over at Ginny's mother.

"She looks more sad than angry."

It was true. Mrs. Weasley was shooting a few annoyed glances at Deanna, but when her eyes fell on Ginny, all that was in them was sadness, pure and simple.

Ginny had noticed it too. Leaving Deanna and Luella, she went over to her mother.

"I'm sorry, Mum," she said quietly, for the second time that evening. However, this time, she didn't sound like a frightened child begging for forgiveness. This time, the

tone of her voice indicated that while she was sorry her mother was upset, she wasn't sorry for what had caused it.

"If it's where you'll be happy," said Mrs. Weasley woodenly, before wiping away a tear and pulling Ginny into her arms. "Oh, Ginny," she wept. "My precious, precious Ginny! I so hoped you'd follow in our footsteps, but if it's not to be..." She let her daughter go and tried to smile. "Just... be good, alright? I don't want you getting mixed up in anything untoward or illegal, understand?"

"Too late," muttered Deanna. Mrs. Weasley paused, remembering recent events.

"Well, not again, anyway," she added.

"I can't be any worse than Fred and George," Ginny grinned. Mrs. Weasley shuddered.

"I should hope not!" she exclaimed, before smiling. "At least you're alive and well. That's the main thing. When I think of all we've been through tonight..." She brushed the thought out of her mind. "It doesn't matter. It's behind us now. You're alive. That's all that matters."

"Thanks, Mum," Ginny whispered, profoundly relieved that there wasn't going to be yet another family rift. She turned to her father. "Dad?"

Mr. Weasley just smiled. "Ginny, do you really think I mind what house you're in? The Malfoys and their friends might be a bad lot, but I know from personal experience that there's plenty of, erm, more benevolent Slytherins out there. Like Melissa, or Snape here, or the Tylers, or Miss Martin, who by the way, I don't believe I've actually thanked for saving your life yet. Excuse me for one minute, Ginny." He walked over to where Harry and Luella were sitting and bowed very formally. "Harry, Miss Martin..."

"Luella. Please," Luella said, feeling rather uncomfortable about all this.

"Very well. Luella, Harry. I'd just like to say thank you to both of you for saving my daughter, that it was a very brave thing to do, and if there's ever anything I can do to repay you both..." Mr. Weasley choked on his words, just about managing to hold back the tears, but only just. Instead, he grabbed hold of Harry's hand and pumped it up and down furiously, before letting him go and sweeping Luella into a hug that nearly crushed the life out of her.

"Quite alright, Mr. Weasley!" Luella gasped, extricating herself. "It's what I'm here for after all." She reached out and smoothed her hair and clothes down. And it was then that her cloak slipped away from her right arm, revealing her Mark to the sharp-eyed gaze of Mrs. Weasley.

"What is that on your arm?" she gasped, pointing at the symbol. Luella hastily tried to cover it up, but it was too late. Mrs. Weasley had seen it and was not to be put off. Getting up, she stepped forward and swept the cloak back.

"A tattoo?" She gave Luella a very hard stare. "Exactly what sort of family do you come from?"

Luella stared desperately at Snape and Dumbledore. She'd deliberately left the part about her being the Second Heir of Slytherin out of the story she'd told the Weasleys earlier, guessing that they probably wouldn't understand and it would only either confuse or antagonise them. "Help me," she whispered.

"Don't worry, Luella," Dumbledore stepped in. "I'll explain everything. Molly, you asked what sort of family she came from. I shall tell you. Her immediate family are very respectable Muggles. But her mother's distant forbears are members of a very honourable lineage indeed, one that goes back to the Founding and beyond. The same family as Deanna's, in fact."

Both Weasleys looked rather puzzled at this. "But... how can that be?" asked Mr. Weasley. "The Tylers only emerged in the eighteenth century, they started out as Welsh Muggle-borns."

"Unless you mean the Yorkshire Tylers," added Mrs. Weasley, "who emigrated from New England not long after the Welsh Tylers established themselves. But they were Muggle-borns too."

A hollow laugh came from Snape. "Don't believe everything you hear," he sneered. "Of course we said we were Muggle-borns - the Ministry would have wiped us out if they'd known who we really were. My ancestors came back for a reason - our Welsh cousins had told us it was safe again."

"You're a Yorkshire Tyler?" asked Mr. Weasley, now completely bewildered.

"My mother was," Snape told him.

"But if you weren't Muggle-borns really, who were you?" Mrs. Weasley demanded. "Why did you need to hide your identities?"

"Persecution. War. The usual," Snape said casually. "We were at war with another prominent family. They had fingers in as much of the Muggle elite as they could get their hands into - the landed aristocracy, the Church, everywhere. Their ancestors were Muggle aristocrats, and they'd never lost the taste for it. They believed they were born to rule, and that God had given them magic to do just that. Of course, the magic resulted from a dynastic marriage many years before, but they chose to ignore that unless it suited them. They spent most of their time manipulating and exploiting Muggle society in order to enrich themselves and ensure that they were more powerful than various other less 'contaminated' families who might otherwise have despised them for their Muggle connections. And of course, to deal with their equally powerful rivals that wanted revenge," Here, Snape gave a twisted little smile. "My family."

"And then what?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Did they defeat you?"

Snape nodded. "They did. For a time. See, many among us were known for our healing ability and our hatred of tyranny, especially when women and children bore the brunt of it, and we worked as midwives, healers, political agitators, doing what we could to help the ordinary folk of Great Britain do what they could to get by. It helped that we were a Welsh family at a time when the English establishment was at its most ruthless. And in the end, things came to a head. We scored a magnificent coup in getting rid of the Catholic church as an official force when we assisted a young Muggle princess of Welsh extraction to secure the throne from her sister, which severely dented our enemies' power. And they were quick to take revenge. Once our patron monarch was dead, forty-five glorious years later, they swung into action, setting up a new dynasty with a king who hated women and witchcraft above all. Where our queen had discouraged religious extremism of all kinds, this king sided with the worst of the Protestants, who by this time, our enemies had infiltrated. He was not slow in declaring witch hunts, and our enemies took advantage of the situation and accused us of dark magic. The Ministry got involved, and between the Aurors and the Inquisition, our days were numbered," Snape stared bitterly into the fire. "We lost everything. Most of our money. Our power. Any influence over either the Muggle or mage establishment. Our chief strongholds at Glastonbury and Tintagel. They drove us back right into the very depths of Wales, until our clan mother finally gathered the remnants into our last bastion in Pembrokeshire. And here we were finally safe. The Muggles here were having none of the witchcraze, and refused to be of any assistance whatsoever, while there were no mages around to help the Ministry. Unable to find us, they gave in. And so some of our number remained there, the dominant ones among us. However, also at that time, the first colonies in America were being set up. And so some emigrated, fleeing over the sea to a land where the Ministry would never find them. They left the colonies, befriended local people, teamed up with various other fugitive mages and travelled north to present day Massachusetts, where they founded the all-mage town of Arkham, so named because they regarded it as their Ark, their sanctuary until the floodwaters went down. And that is how things stayed until the political climate changed. Until the Enlightenment freed the Muggles from believing in such superstitions and fatally undermined the Puritans and clergy, the Industrial Revolution savaged our enemies' wealth, and the (A/N: *English, not American!*) Civil War took their land, most of it anyway. The Ministry responded to all these changes by withdrawing entirely from the Muggle world, and banning adult mages from having any contact with it unless absolutely necessary. And so we could finally return and regroup. We still had quite a bit of wealth piled up, and although we never achieved our former power, we were more than capable of re-establishing ourselves. However, there was one thing we could never regain. And that was our good name. Our true name was lost to us, defamed and blackened by our enemies, associated with the worst kind of evil. And so we had to take another one, pretending to be Muggle-borns. My branch of the family had it worst - we couldn't even claim to be British Muggle-borns. We had to put up with all the condescension of the English at their worst. And so, even though we were free again, we never were able to fully heal the wounds. And so it endured until this very day. Our one consolation was that our enemies had also dwindled in numbers and power. But it didn't help us." Snape fell silent, gazing into the fire again.

Mrs. Weasley broke the silence. "But who were they?" she asked. "I mean... your family, that is. And your enemies, who were they? Are they still around? Are they as dangerous as you make out?"

"Oh yes," Snape nodded. "I strongly suspect they caused your daughter's troubles this year. They're the Malfoy family."

"The Malfoys!" exclaimed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"The Malfoys?" Ron whispered to Harry. "But if that's so... why is Draco his favourite student?"

Harry just shrugged. "Maybe it's all part of some devious conspiracy to stab them in the back by subverting their son. Who knows?"

Mrs. Weasley had turned to Ginny, grasping her shoulders and looking her straight in the eye.

"Ginny, are you sure you still want to stay in Slytherin?"

"Mum!" snapped Ginny.

"Alright, alright, dear, I was just asking," said Mrs. Weasley, backing off.

Deanna tugged Mrs. Weasley's sleeve.

"Mrs. Weasley, I can guarantee that Draco will not try anything with Ginny. If he does, I will personally make him wish he'd been born a Muggle."

Mrs. Weasley did not look convinced. "But he managed to give Ginny the diary last time..."

"No he didn't," Ginny countered. "He had no idea what it was."

"It's true," Harry spoke up. "When Draco first saw the diary, he didn't show any signs of recognising it. In fact, he tried to take it off me. Didn't work though."

"He did take it off me," said Ginny softly. "Not long after I stole it back. He wanted to see what it was, so I let him. He saw it was blank, wanted to give it back, but I told him I didn't want it. So he kept hold of it. Right up until last week," Ginny shivered at the memory. "He gave it back the morning Marlie was attacked. Said he felt bad about taking it," She laughed miserably. "You know, he was actually trying to be nice to me? Look where it got us all."

"Either that or his dad had told him what it was in the mean time and told him to get it back to you ASAP," Ron sneered.

"He didn't," sighed Deanna. "The day before he'd apologised to me for getting Luella expelled. He really was trying to redeem himself."

"He got Luella expelled, did he?" said Mr. Weasley grimly. "Why am I not surprised? Nothing that family does surprises me any more. How'd he manage that then?"

The room fell silent. Ron became aware of Harry, Luella and Snape looking at him knowingly, with varying degrees of disapproval. Steeling himself for the inevitable row, he opened his mouth to confess.

"Please, Dad, it was..."

"All down to Malfoy and his friends eavesdropping," Deanna interrupted, shooting Ron a glance that told him to shut up or else. "They found out certain stuff about Lu which they shouldn't have done, twisted it to make it look like she was guilty and told Malfoy's dad. That's how." Ron stared at Deanna.

"What?" he whispered. "But you know it was..."

"Your fault?" Deanna whispered back. "Yeah, I know. But there's not really anything to gain by you getting in trouble too, is there?"

"Thanks," Ron whispered, suddenly grateful. "I don't deserve it, you know."

"I know that," Deanna muttered. "But look at it this way. You hate Malfoy. I hate Malfoy. Let's bury the hatchet and work together in future, shall we?"

"Alright," Ron grinned. "Cheers!" They shook hands.

"Anything to do with that tattoo, by any chance?" Mrs. Weasley's voice cut across the room. "You still haven't told us what that's for."

"That, my dear," said Snape, finally raising his eyes, "leads us back to the identity of my forebears. It's a name you've certainly heard. We," Snape got his feet with a flourish, "were the hated and feared Tal-y-Rhys."

"What?" gasped Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley put an arm around his wife, who had gone pale.

"Not the child-murderers?" she gasped.

"The main abortion providers in Wales and the South West," Snape corrected her.

"Child-stealers?" Mrs. Weasley offered.

"And the only adoption agency."

"Abductors of young people up and down the country?"

"We only took those who wanted to come. Namely, those escaping marriages that had become a prison or marriages they were going to be forced in to, those escaping abusive families, or who had nowhere else to go."

"Inventors of the Avada Kedavra curse?"

"Originally invented by our healers as a means of swiftly and painlessly ending the misery of those who we couldn't save, and also used as a means of evading capture or torture, or bringing a quick death to captured mages and Muggles undergoing torture or burning at the stake."

Mrs. Weasley tilted her head to one side, watching him rather thoughtfully. "I daresay the trafficking with demons isn't true either, is it?"

Snape merely bowed his head. "While certain of us certainly were engaged in demonology, I can honestly say it was not a widespread practice. Nor was it limited to the Tal-y-Rhys."

Mrs. Weasley digested all this. "So none of the tales told about them are true then?"
"No."

"Just lies and distortions of the truth put about by the Malfoys?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Weasley looked sharply at him before turning to Dumbledore. "Is all this true?"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore amiably. "Every word."

"And Luella and Deanna are both descended from them."

"I'm not descended from them," Deanna spoke up indignantly. "I am one!"

"I see," said Mrs. Weasley. "And do you all have those tattoos?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. Just Lu."

"Just Luella?" Mrs. Weasley began to look really confused at this, sitting down again. "Why is that?"

"That, Mrs. Weasley, brings us back to our tale of how the Tal-y-Rhys lost their power," said Snape. "But it also brings us back to how our feud with the Malfoys originated. And it started with the usual family wrangling." And Snape proceeded to explain to them all how Rowena Ravenclaw had been a Tal-y-Rhys, heiress of the noted clan mother Rhiannon the White Lady, had married Salazar Slytherin and conceived from him a daughter, Morgan. How they'd founded Hogwarts together, but drifted apart as Salazar became ever more ambitious, until finally he'd divorced her out of the blue, tried to marry Morgan off to a Muggle lord, failed, married a rather more pliant Veela instead, had a daughter and married her off to the heir of the De Malfois family. The resulting line of warrior-mages had served his cause ever since, and had been bitter enemies of the Tal-y-Rhys. Salazar himself had been defeated, thanks to his former wife and elder daughter turning against him. And Morgan had prophesied that Slytherin House would remain in darkness for a thousand years, until two Heirs of Slytherin would be born to the Muggles, grow up to become powerful mages and fight each other to the death. And the Heir of Morgan would win with

Gryffindor help, and the Heir of Salazar would be defeated for good. Then the wounds would heal, the feuds end and peace return at last.

"Salazar's Heir must have been Riddle then." Mr. Weasley said thoughtfully. "And Morgan's Heir?"

"Is right here," said Deanna, indicating Luella. "Some of the Tal-y-Rhys were squibs, and we think she's descended from one of them. At any rate, she's got Morgan's Mark, has had ever since the Chamber opened."

"It's true," Luella confirmed. "You know, Ginny, maybe you did me a favour after all."

Ginny blushed and looked away. It was Mrs. Weasley who spoke up.

"So... does that mean the prophecy's done now? After all, you have defeated the other Heir. And you have healed quite a few wounds in doing so."

It was Dumbledore who answered. "Afraid not, Molly. That was only a shadow of the real Lord Voldemort. The real Heir of Salazar is still out there somewhere, gone but not destroyed. He tried to return last year, he may try to do it again. This battle is won and very decisively too. But the war still goes on. The bloodfeud still goes on."

"It's true," Deanna sighed. "Sorry, Lu. I still hate Malfoy."

"That's alright," Luella comforted her. "I still hate Malfoy too."

"So you'll be needing allies then," said Mr. Weasley.

Deanna and Snape both looked at him rather guardedly.

"Maybe," answered Deanna.

Mr. Weasley exchanged looks with his wife. Mrs. Weasley nodded.

"Do it, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley approached Snape, hand outstretched.

"Professor, it's a fairly open secret that my family and that of Lucius Malfoy have never been on the best of terms, and, well, if your lot despise them as well, it only seems natural that your family and mine join forces. What do you say, Professor?"

Snape bowed. "Mr. Weasley, I would be honoured. However, it's not me you should be approaching. Clan alliances can only be made by appealing to the Tal-y-Rhys Clan Mother."

Mr. Weasley dropped his hand, rather deflated. "Oh. Er, who might that be?"

"You already know her. Caitlin Tyler."

"Really?" Mr. Weasley practically jumped up and down with delight. "Is she really? My goodness, I had no idea. Well, I shall certainly have to have a word with her."

"Indeed," remarked Snape. "However, if you wish to swear allegiance tonight, the eldest daughter of the Clan Mother is also empowered to take oaths of loyalty."

"I am?" Deanna stared at him.

"Of course you are, girl, you're Heiress of Tal-y-Rhys. When you come of age, you'll exercise powers almost equal to those of the Lady herself, including forming provisional year and a day alliances between the Tal-y-Rhys and other clans."

"Yeah, but I'm only fourteen," Deanna responded.

Snape just smiled. "You can still form provisional alliances now. They just need to be confirmed by your mother within a month to be valid."

"Well, alright then!" However, Deanna still looked dubious. "Er... is there any set means of doing this?"

"I believe there's a proper ritual somewhere," Snape observed. "But I can't remember what it is and now is not the time to look for it. Just do your best."

"OK," sighed Deanna. "But don't blame me if this goes horribly wrong. Do you both promise to help us when we need it?"

"We do," Mr. and Mrs. Weasley promised.

"Do you promise to regard the Malfoys, Lord Voldemort and any of their allies or agents as your enemies?"

"Of course."

"Do you promise not to go running to any of the above with any family secrets?" This was said with a particularly pointed look at Ron.

"We do."

"And do you promise to provide a warm welcome and some of that very nice chocolate cake that Mrs. Weasley makes to any hungry members of Clan Tal-y-Rhys that might happen to drop by at any time?" Deanna asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

Mr. Weasley burst out laughing, while Mrs. Weasley pretended to look rather shocked. Snape just raised an eyebrow.

"I don't recall *that* being in the usual Oath of Allegiance."

"What?" Deanna protested. "You told me to wing it! Anyway," she folded her arms, marshalling all of the Tyler determination, "clan alliances generally involve providing services when a member of the family is in need, and my needs include having a

mother whose cooking ability is limited to baked beans on toast. Sometimes cheese on toast if she's feeling adventurous."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley smiled at each other. Caitlin's lack of anything resembling domestic skills was legendary.

"Deanna, dear, feel free to come over whenever you like," Mrs. Weasley smiled. "There's always food available, you'll be quite welcome."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," Deanna smiled, before turning to Ron and Ginny. "What about you two? Allies?"

"Allies!" yelled Ginny, clasping Deanna's hand. Deanna shook hands before turning to Ron.

"Well? Allies?"

Ron hesitated before holding out his hand. "Allies." They shook on it.

"Is that everything?" Mr. Weasley asked after shaking Deanna's hand in turn.

"Pretty much. I'll tell Mum everything, and then I think she'll meet up with you and confirm it, give you a token of alliance or something, I'm a bit vague on the details."

"What about the other children?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"No probs. We'll get them ourselves and ask them. Won't we, Lu?"

"Yeah, leave that to us. Marls can do Fred and George, and I'll get Penny to swear in Percy when she wakes up...." Luella suddenly remembered that she'd promised to keep quiet about Percy and Penny's relationship.

"Penny?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Who's Penny?"

"Penny Clearwater," said Luella, realising that it was too late to keep quiet now. "Patrick Clearwater's daughter, she's my cousin."

"I know the family," Mr. Weasley nodded. "But what's she got to do with our Percy?"

"They're not going out, are they?" Ginny asked, starting to grin. She saw the mortified look on Luella's face. "They are, aren't they? Oh wow, Percy's got a girlfriend!"

"Percy?" Ron looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Has got a girlfriend?" He stared blankly at Luella. "How?"

"Ron!" snapped Mrs. Weasley. She turned to Luella, seemingly enraptured. "Percy's got a girlfriend! How wonderful! What's she like? Is she a nice girl?"

"She's lovely," Luella promised her. "You'll like her."

Mrs. Weasley sighed with happiness. "Oh, that's just perfect! I was worried about him, but to hear he's finally found someone... Wonderful! We shall have to invite her over, won't we Arthur?"

"Er, yes, yes, whatever you say, Molly," said Mr. Weasley hastily.

"Splendid!" laughed Mrs. Weasley. She turned to her other children, who were still trying not to burst out laughing. "Now, you two will promise not to tease him, won't you?"

"Absolutely, Mum," said Ginny, a very picture of innocence.

Ron nodded. "We won't say a word," He waited until his mother had turned away before whispering to his sister, "We'll just let Fred and George get on with it."

"Sounds like a plan," giggled Ginny.

Dumbledore's voice cut across the general hubbub.

"And now," he announced, "that everything seems to have been brought to the best of conclusions, I think it's about time we all went to bed. It's getting late after all, and we've all been sitting talking for quite long enough... yes, Harry?"

Harry had his hand in the air, clearly wanting to ask just one last question.

"Sir," he began, "you know there was doubt over what house Ginny was in?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Well, there's a bit of doubt over what house I'm really part of too."

"There is?" Ron asked, confused.

"Yeah," nodded Harry. "When I was first sorted, the Hat tried... it tried..." He collected his wits. "It tried to put me in Slytherin." There it was. The secret was out. Although, now he'd actually voiced his secret fear, in the office of the Head of Slytherin, with no less than four Slytherins in the room with him, it sounded faintly ridiculous. Nevertheless, he was not to be put off. "It only put me in Gryffindor because I asked it not to be Slytherin. I didn't think anything of it again until this year. Then the whole Heir of Slytherin thing started up, I got suspected, and I can do Parseltongue too. And Riddle, well, he's a lot like me, I mean..."

"You're sneaking round the school at night attacking students?" sneered Snape derisively. "Dear me, Professor McGonagall doesn't know the half of it, does she?"

"Not like that!" Harry protested. "But we've both got the same background. We're both orphans, both Muggle-raised, both had horrible childhoods, we even look alike. Even Luella said I was more ruthless than she is."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Luella gasped. "I just said I couldn't have brought myself to kill the Basilisk, that's all!"

"I heard what you said," Harry smiled grimly. "You said you were too compassionate, unlike me," He turned back to Dumbledore. "I guess what I'm really asking is, am I really a hero? Or the next dark wizard in waiting?"

Dumbledore knelt next to him, their eyes meeting. "Do you want to be?"

"No!" cried Harry. "But... I'm scared I might end up being one without even realising it."

Dumbledore just looked at him gently. "Harry. Listen to me. Yes, there are similarities between you and Riddle. You both came from less than happy backgrounds. But that's where it ends. Yes, you've emerged with a dark side - who wouldn't, given that kind of upbringing? But Riddle is evil for one reason and one reason only - because he chose to be. Not necessarily because he was in Slytherin - you and I both know that ambition can be used for good. But he chose the path of evil. You did not. You chose the path of good."

"But I'm still a Parselmouth," Harry pointed out. "I'm still part Slytherin, if not a full one."

"Thank Apollo," muttered Snape. Dumbledore chose to ignore him.

"Harry, dear boy, listen to your friend Luella, one who's certainly qualified to speak authoritatively on all things Slytherin. She said she couldn't have killed the Basilisk, she wasn't ruthless enough. And yet it needed to be killed, or you or someone else would have surely died," Dumbledore smiled at Harry. "Slytherin pragmatism has its place, don't feel ashamed of it. It just needs balancing with other qualities, such as honour, bravery, honesty and decency. Qualities which your Gryffindor side possesses in abundance."

"I never thought of it like that," Harry admitted. "But what about the Parseltongue?"

"Oh that," said Dumbledore. "As to that, my best guess is that when Voldemort left that scar on your head as a child, he also left some of his power within you, including the ability to talk to snakes. Not your fault and certainly no indicator of future moral development."

Harry didn't look so sure. Dumbledore, seeing this, reached out and took the sword that Harry had drawn from the Hat.

"Harry. Look at this sword. Really look at it. Especially the design on the hilt."

Harry examined it carefully, soon picking out the familiar double-snake Mark of Morgan.

"The Mark," he said miserably. "Sign of the Tal-y-Rhys. I should be one of them."

"Look closer," Dumbledore urged him. "In particular at the animal head between those of the two snakes, and the name on the hilt."

"It's a lion's head," Harry said in amazement. "And..." here his eyes widened yet further, "It belongs to Godric Gryffindor!" He handed the sword to Dumbledore, unable to believe his eyes.

"Yes," smiled Dumbledore. "Godric Gryffindor's sword, forged for him by Morgan Tal-y-Rhys's best smiths." His eyes turned serious. "Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the Hat, Harry."

Deanna's eyes lit up when she heard this. "Cool!" She gave Luella a nudge. "Told you it was a serious bit of kit, didn't I?"

Harry got up, shaking, and turned to Ron. "Wow," he whispered. "I really am a Gryffindor!"

Ron just snorted. "Well, duh. Of course you are, Harry, me and Hermione could have told you in a second!" He patted his friend on the back. "Come on, you. Let's go back to the dorm. We've had a long day."

"An excellent idea, if I may say so," said Dumbledore. "Come on, let's all let Severus have his office back."

"Yes, can Severus have his office back?" snapped Snape rather testily. "It's getting late and I have a Restorative Draught to finish. If you don't mind."

"All in good time, Severus, all in good time. Arthur, Molly, do you want to spend the night in Hogwarts' guest rooms? It's a little late to be travelling back now, after all."

"Why, thank you, Albus, we'd love to," smiled Mrs. Weasley. She turned to Ginny. "Ginny, love, do you want to stay with us, or are you happy to go back to your own dorm?"

"I'll go back to my own dorm," Ginny decided. "Everyone will want to know where I am, after all."

And so the little gathering dispersed, Deanna and Luella accompanying Ginny back to the Serpents' Nest, Dumbledore showing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to the guest suite, and Harry and Ron making for Gryffindor Tower with a note from Dumbledore in case they ran into any teachers. Leaving Snape alone. From a hidden perch in the far corner of the room, Corvus emerged from hiding and fluttered to join his wizard companion.

"*Have they gone?*" the raven enquired.

"*Yes, thank Hades,*" sighed Snape, sinking back into his chair, relieved that it was all over. "*Is the potion alright?*"

"*Bubbling along nicely, just like it should be. Ready in a few hours, I estimate.*"

"Excellent," yawned Snape. "After a day like today, the last thing I need is any more hassles."

"Is it all sorted out then?" asked the bird. "Did they rescue that young red-feathered fledgling?" "Yes, she's perfectly safe and well. In the end, everything turned out beautifully. They got the predator and his snake, and everything is back to normal."

Corvus flapped his wings in jubilation. "Ah-ha! So now it's time for one of those party things, is it?"

"For them," shrugged Snape. "All I want to do is sleep. I'll tell you this, Corvus, victory may well be sweet, but what they don't bother to tell you is that the aftermath wears you out."

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Chapter Thirty The Best Possible Outcome

Despite the late hour, the Nest was far from empty. Quite a few Slytherins, unable to face going to bed, were still up, sitting listlessly around, not sure what to do with themselves. Draco was still sitting in the wooden chair he'd been in before, Pansy perched on the arm, leaning against him for support. Lydia was curled up on a beanbag next to the fire, with Autumn just opposite, sharing a silent vigil for one they hadn't realised they could get so close to.

"Wonder if we'll ever see her again," said Autumn morosely.

Lydia shrugged. "Who knows. DT and Ri went after her, they wouldn't have done that if they didn't think there was a chance."

"Or maybe they just wanted revenge," Autumn countered.

Lydia shook her head. "Not Rianne. She wouldn't go unless there was a point to it. She'd have bided her time and waited. Deanna may not listen to many people, but Rianne is one of them." They fell silent again. There was some hope, but it was a slim one even so. For a time, they watched the fire dance in the shadowy stone hearth, desolate with a tawdry string of fibre-optics, a stark reminder of another Slytherin gone.

"It'll be quiet without her," said Autumn softly.

"Laetitia says it used to be this quiet all the time before Marlie got to work on this place," said Lydia, gazing around.

"Never this quiet," whispered Autumn. She looked at her feet. "I'll miss her."

"I'll miss her too." They fell silent, until the quiet was broken by the sound of the door opening. Everyone turned, wondering if it were Snape with yet another announcement. They couldn't believe their eyes as Deanna appeared, smiling in triumph.

"Hey kids," she grinned, leaping into the room. "We got visitors." She stepped aside to reveal Ginny, covered in cobwebs and grime but otherwise alive and well.

"Gin!" the two first years shrieked, rushing forward to greet her. "You're alive!"

Ginny held her arms open and the three of them hugged.

"It's alright!" Ginny whispered. "It's over! I'm OK!"

Lydia looked her up and down. "What happened to you?" she asked, taking in Ginny's dishevelled state.

"I got dragged through a disused water pipe to this underground chamber," Ginny explained. Both Lydia and Autumn immediately backed off.

"Eww," squealed Autumn.

"Gin, mate, don't take this the wrong way, but can we hug you later?" Lydia asked. "Like, after you've had a shower and changed?"

Ginny tossed her hair back. "Huh! That's nice! I nearly get killed and all you two can think about is your outfits?" She reached out and touched her hair. "How bad is it?"

"Really bad," Lydia told her, looking mildly repulsed.

Autumn nodded in agreement. "Truly disgusting."

Ginny grimaced as she looked at herself. "Oh gods. I'll go and get changed." She made to leave, but found herself blocked by the sudden appearance of Draco Malfoy, looking unaccountably cheerful.

"What do you want?" she snapped at him.

Draco's face fell. "I just wanted to see if you were OK."

"Well, don't," Ginny glared at him. "Oh, and Draco."

"Yeah?"

"Next time you want to do me a favour... don't bother." And with that, she turned and stalked off, leaving a bewildered Draco behind her. Lydia and Autumn took one look at Draco, glared at him and followed their friend out.

"What did I do?" he asked, puzzled. Behind him, Pansy approached, patting him on the shoulder.

"Draco, honey, I think you'd best quit while you're ahead."

"Suppose," sighed Draco. He turned away, and came face to face with someone he'd not expected to see. Luella.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, too surprised to sneer at her. Unfortunately, Pansy had rather better recovery skills.

"Shouldn't you be at home?" she sneered.

"Should be," Luella replied, taking a step forward. "But I'm not." She drew her wand, forcing them both to take a step back.

"You're not allowed one of them!" squealed Pansy, cowering behind Draco. "You're expelled!"

Luella's grin widened. "Not any more! See, I saved Ginny's life, and then someone else revealed what had really been going on, and, well, I'm reinstated pending the paperwork."

"Ah." Draco and Pansy looked at each other, both thinking 'now what?'

Deanna came up to stand alongside her friend.

"We're not interested in your apologies, or your excuses."

"But luckily for you, we're also not concerned about revenge," Luella's gaze hardened. "Yet. Now get out of my sight."

They didn't need telling twice. The two second years turned and ran, heading for the safety of their respective dorms, leaving Luella and Deanna alone.

"Reckon they've learnt their lesson?" Deanna asked, rather half-heartedly.

Luella shrugged. "Who knows? But as long as they don't see me as the weak one of our little group any more, I don't care. Come on." She put an arm around Deanna's shoulders. "Let's go to bed."

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Rianne, meanwhile, had had a rather less eventful time of it. Madam Pomfrey, fussing over the Petrified students, took one look at them both and shrieked.

"What happened to you two?" she gasped. "You both look absolutely filthy! Come in right now, have a bath and get into some decent clothes!" She summoned some of the hospital wing house elves and ordered them to prepare a hot bath and a set of hospital robes, and to fetch a spare outfit from Lockhart's quarters, before turning back to Rianne.

"What has he done now?" she asked, exasperated. "He's not been trying to mend bones again, has he? Honestly, I've had more patients in here because of him than anyone else in the school. Including Professor Snape's and Madam Hooch's classes."

"He's lost his memory," Rianne explained. "Tried to cast a Memory Charm, and his wand exploded. He doesn't remember a thing."

"Doesn't remember..." Madam Pomfrey stared at her. "What, nothing?"

Rianne shook her head. "Nothing at all. Not even his own name."

"Really?" Madam Pomfrey began to smile. "What, really? Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing," Rianne grinned. "It was the Obliviate Charm."

"The one that wipes out memories for good and is irreversible," Madam Pomfrey's grin was unmistakable. "Oh dear. Well, Gilderoy, unfortunately there's very little we can do about that, not here anyway. Still, why don't you clean yourself up and rest, and I'll have a word with Professor Snape and the staff at St. Mungo's in the morning."

Lockhart beamed at her. "Thank you, my dear. I don't believe I've had the pleasure?"

"Poppy Pomfrey, dear," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly as she led him away towards the bath the house elves had prepared.

"Such a lovely name! And where might I be?" Lockhart enquired pleasantly.

"You're in the hospital wing, my love. You've had a rather nasty shock, and you look like you've been through a lot, so we're going to give you a nice hot bath, and then a good night's sleep in a nice, warm, comfy bed and we'll see how you are in the morning." She left Lockhart in one of the bathrooms to get on with it before turning back to Rianne, eyebrows raised.

"Dare I ask where you two have been?"

"Run me a bath and I'll tell you," Rianne yawned, suddenly aware of how tired she was.

"Normally, I'd send you straight back to your dorm to get changed seeing as you're apparently healthy, but you've got me intrigued." She looked at Rianne carefully. "Tell you what, seeing as these will be waking up tomorrow, why don't you stay here overnight? It'd do them good to have someone here to fill them in on events, someone who isn't a teacher, I mean. Especially as one of them is a friend of yours anyway."

"Sounds good to me," Rianne agreed. And as the house-elves prepared her bath, she began to tell Madam Pomfrey what had happened.

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Morning finally dawned on the now-safe-for-humanity school. Rianne found herself woken up by the house-elves dusting the Petrified students, and Madam Pomfrey bustling around making sure everything was ready for the Grand Awakening.

"Wake up!" she cried, fussing at Rianne. "Nearly time, don't you know! Professor Snape's owled me to let me know that the potion is ready, so we'll be waking them up within the hour. Hurry up, child, get dressed. Professor Snape will be here soon and you don't want him seeing you half-naked, do you?"

Rianne privately thought that Snape would be rather more embarrassed than she would be by an encounter with her still in her nightwear, but she didn't say anything. The house elves had taken her old clothes away to be washed, and a new set had been brought up for her, so she busied herself getting dressed and brushing her hair. She had no sooner finished when Snape himself walked in. He didn't seem surprised to see her there.

"Ah, Miss Stormosi. The one absentee from last night's revels. Were you involved with the raid on the Chamber of Secrets as well?"

"Involved?" Rianne said, mildly outraged. "Sir, I *organised* it!"

"Should have known," Snape remarked. "So what are you up here for? You weren't hurt, I hope."

"Oh no," Rianne told him. "I had to escort Lockhart up here. He's in a bad way."

"Really?" Snape's eyes widened. "How bad? Is he alive? Did he die a painful and horribly violent death on a Basilisk's fangs?"

"No. He made it in one piece."

"Pity," Snape glanced around. "So where is he then?"

"In a private room," Madam Pomfrey said, very disapproving. "He tried to erase these poor children's memories, and I'm very glad to say it backfired on him. He can't remember a thing."

"What, nothing?"

"Nothing at all. Apparently it was Obliviate."

Snape couldn't have looked happier if he'd just been told Gryffindor had withdrawn from the House Cup competition and gifted the trophy to Slytherin.

"Oh happy, glorious day!" he sighed. "Poppy, I could kiss you!" He quickly reassumed his sober professional mask. "Of course, it's a very serious charm, Obliviate. Irreversible. Sometimes the memories return of their own accord, but it takes time, and rest. Clearly, he won't be able to return to teaching for a very long time, if ever."

Rianne and Madam Pomfrey couldn't resist cheering at this news.

"Don't suppose we can have a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher without any Dark Arts knowledge after all, can we?" smiled Madam Pomfrey, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Oh, I don't know, we've managed alright this year," Rianne reflected as all three of them dissolved into pure, uninhibited laughter. Finally, the merriment subsided.

"Suppose we'd better wake them up, hadn't we?" Snape asked, surveying the students with only a slight curl of the lip. He reached into his bag and produced a vial of a deep purple liquid, sparkling a little in the light, and a funnel. "Would you care to do the honours, Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey took the items from him and began to revive Riddle's victims one by one. Mrs. Norris took one look, screeched at them and ran out into the corridor. Rianne felt her heart sink. It had been quite nice having a Mrs. Norris-free school, she'd got rather used to it. Shame the wretched animal was back.

Next was Colin Creevey, who woke up, reached for his camera, found it wasn't there and stared at Madam Pomfrey.

"My camera!" he blinked.

"It got destroyed," Madam Pomfrey explained. "You were attacked..."

"By a big snake, I remember!" Colin interrupted, alive with excitement. "Miss, there's a huge snake loose in the school!"

"I know," Madam Pomfrey reassured him. "Don't worry, it's been got rid of now. It won't be back."

Justin, on waking up, said much the same thing, exclaiming that he'd been talking to Nearly Headless Nick and "there it was, a bloody great big snake, looking right back at me, don't you know! Gave me the most awful fright."

Penelope didn't say much, just shaking and whispering about "the eyes! Those horrible eyes! What was it?"

Her question was soon answered as Madam Pomfrey revived Hermione. The Gryffindor sat bolt upright as soon as the potion touched her lips.

"A Basilisk!" she yelled. "It's a Basilisk! And the diary, we've got to find the diary, it's evil."

Rianne went to sit beside her. So Marlie and Hermione had known what was going on. She'd thought as much.

"It's alright," she told her. "It's dead."

"The diary or the snake?" Hermione asked.

"Both," smiled Rianne.

Next to her, Madam Pomfrey administered the potion to Marlie. Who, true to form, provided the most dramatic reaction of them all.

"*GINNY!*" she screamed on waking, almost leaping out of bed and staring about panic-stricken. "I have to find Ginny, she's in so much trouble!" She noticed Rianne sitting next to her and lost no time in grabbing her. "Ri! The diary, Ginny's got it, Voldemort's possessed her, it's *her!*"

"Chill, Marlie," Rianne reassured her. "I know."

"You know?" gasped Marlie. "But..."

"But nothing," Rianne told her. "Ginny's fine, the Basilisk's dead, and the diary's been neutralised. Everything's gonna be just fine."

"You got the diary?"

"We got the diary."

Marlie sank back down on to the bed, clasping her hand to her chest with relief. "Thank God," she whispered. Suddenly, she realised something and began feeling around her throat, looking for something. She didn't find it.

"My necklace. It's not here." She began frantically hunting for it. "Where's my necklace? Who took my necklace?!"

"Deanna," Rianne replied. "She didn't want anyone walking off with it. Think Lu's got it now."

"She hasn't," Snape interrupted. "Dumbledore took it last night, and he's given it to me. Here you are. Your necklace, Miss Lovegood." He held it out and dropped it into her waiting hands. Marlie lost no time in fastening it around her neck, clasping the Snitch and sighing contentedly. Until she realised something else, and her eyes shot open.

"Lu's back?" she asked, incredulous.

"She is?" gasped Hermione from the next bed.

"She was gone?" asked Penelope, scratching her head in confusion.

"Oh boy, have you guys missed out," sighed Rianne. "Sit back and listen up, folks, we have had one hell of a year..."

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The others weren't slow in getting out of bed either. As soon as the curfew ended and the common room doors unlocked themselves, the small group that had gathered in Snape's office the previous evening reconvened in the Entrance Hall.

Deanna and Luella, followed by Ginny and her friends, who had by now been fully updated on the whole story, emerged into daylight, meeting Harry and Ron, who were on their way down. Nothing was said by any of them. It didn't feel right or even necessary. Luella just went straight up to Harry and gave him a hug, while Deanna approached Ron and gave him a high-five. Ron returned the gesture with a smile, before turning to his sister and giving her a hug.

They remained there for several minutes, no one speaking, just smiling, until they were joined by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Dumbledore. The Weasleys gave Deanna a formal handshake before Mrs. Weasley embraced Ginny and Mr. Weasley gave Ron a pat on the back. Dumbledore watched indulgently.

"Such affection," he smiled. "It's good to see the family reunited at last."

"I'm just glad they're all alive," said Mrs. Weasley, wiping a tear from her eye.

And then the quiet dissolved as a door opened somewhere upstairs, and the clamour of footsteps and voices echoed down the corridor.

First to come pounding down the stairs was Marlie.

"Ginny!" she yelled, spotting the first year immediately. "Are you alright?"

Ginny stepped forward, nodding happily. "I'm fine. Thanks to you."

Marlie went over to her and gave her a hug. "Thanks to me, nothing. Harry and Lu did the hard work. So Ri tells me."

"Yeah, but your necklace saved Lu," Ginny pointed out.

"Yes, it did, didn't it?" Marlie purred, getting up and looking for Luella. The two girls locked eyes, and Marlie walked over, smiling.

"Luie, baby! Nice to see ya, girlie!"

"And you!" laughed Luella, falling into an embrace. She fingered the necklace, now restored to its rightful owner. "Thank Morticia for me, will you?"

"She already knows," Marlie replied. She released Luella and turned to Deanna. "And you! Necklace thief!"

"Excuse me, Lu's lifesaver as it turned out!" Deanna protested, half-joking as she hugged her friend. "Anyway, if not me, someone else would have had it."

Marlie fingered the chain. "What, for the really valuable chain, one of Elizabeth Duke's finest? Yeah, right."

"They might!" Deanna protested.

"They wouldn't," said Marlie confidently. "Tisha has a nasty habit of burning the hand of anyone who tries to touch this thing with less than pure motives."

"Rather odd, considering that last time I met her, she tried to kill me," Deanna remarked.

"Eh, she's entitled to change her mind," shrugged Marlie.

It was at this point that another figure came running downstairs. This time, it was Hermione, who jumped down the steps two at a time and flung herself around Harry and Ron screaming "You did it! You did it!"

"Thanks to you!" laughed Harry as he hugged her. "We would never have known what the monster was without you!"

Hermione just gave them both a delighted hug before rushing over to find Luella.

"Lu, did you really use the Killing Curse on the diary?" she asked in awe.

"Had to get rid of it somehow," Luella smiled nonchalantly, fingering the end of her wand, safely tucked away in the borrowed school robes of Deanna's that she was wearing. "Anyway, you were pretty smart yourself! If you hadn't told Marlie to use a mirror, she'd be dead, the necklace would no longer work and I'd still be down there!"

Hermione looked at her feet, blushing fit to burst. "It was nothing," she whispered. "I just had the idea and..."

"Used it," finished Marlie. "Thanks, kid." She smiled warmly at the young Gryffindor, and the two of them shook hands.

Next to arrive was Percy Weasley, coming out of the Great Hall to see what all the fuss was about.

"What's going on here, all this shouting and screaming..." He saw his parents standing there. "Mum! Dad! Er... hello."

"Percy!" smiled Mrs. Weasley. "There you are! Why did you never tell us before?"

"Tell you what?" asked Percy warily.

"About your lovely girlfriend, of course!" cried Mr. Weasley, walking over and patting his son on the back. "Well done, lad, never knew you had it in you!"

Percy went crimson and immediately began stuttering and stammering. "I... yes... that is to say... er..." He looked up and saw another figure on the stairs. "Penny?"

Indeed it was. Penelope Clearwater saw him, smiled, and ran down the stairs to greet him.

"Percy!" she smiled, coming to a halt in front of him before remembering no one was meant to know about the two of them. "Hello," she said, rather formally.

Percy looked at her, seeing her alive and breathing for the first time in months, fighting his embarrassment at admitting he had a girlfriend in public, and the impulse to make up for lost time. Finally, the memory of the horrible loneliness of the last three months decided him.

"Penny. Oh Penny, I'm so glad you're back!" he breathed, before pulling her into a hug and kissing her. This was met with rapturous applause from all the spectators.

The three Slytherins and Hermione exchanged looks that all said "Bless!", "Aww!", "How cute!" or thoughts along those lines.

"Go on son, get in there!" Mr. Weasley called before his wife stopped him with a hissed "Arthur!" While Ron and Ginny both began to chant quietly "Percy's got a girlfriend, Percy's got a girlfriend..."

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley snapped at him.

"Ginny was doing it too!"

Ginny promptly poked her tongue out at him.

"I don't care!" sighed Mrs. Weasley. "Will you both pack it in! Honestly, wish I'd stopped with Percy sometimes, I really do..."

Percy finally broke off, leaving Penny rearranging her glasses, which had nearly fallen off. She was pink but happy.

"Ooh! Percy! Thank you," she whispered, shining with happiness.

"It's nothing," he told her. "You're my girlfriend, it's my job." He traced a finger down her cheek, smiling. "Welcome back, Pen."

Penelope smiled back, seemingly about to burst with joy. She hugged him again, before noticing Luella.

"Lu!" she cried, letting Percy go and running over to her cousin. "You're OK!"

"So are you!" laughed Luella as the two girls embraced. "Nice to see you with us again!"

"And you," smiled Penelope. "Rianne told us all what had happened. Did you really get expelled?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Lucius Malfoy broke my wand himself. Of course, I've got a new one now. Present from Caitlin Tyler, hand made by her mum and officially unbreakable." She produced the wand for Penelope to see.

"Nice!" said Penelope as she traced her fingers down the wand's impossibly smooth surface. "You can feel the magic, can't you?"

"I'm told there's an unfinished spell still in there," Luella told her. "Not sure what it does, mind you, but I'm sure we'll find out sooner or later."

"Later, hopefully," Penelope shuddered. "Wands with magical residue left in them can be very unpredictable. Hope you know what you're doing." She abandoned the lecture with a smile. "So, Lu. Do I have you to thank for Percy's change in attitude?" She beckoned her boyfriend over, slipping an arm around him. He still looked faintly embarrassed, but he seemed to be coping rather well.

"Yeah. Sorry," Luella admitted. "Went and let slip that you two knew each other in front of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and they kind of guessed. Sorry."

Percy appeared a little stern at hearing this, but Luella could tell he wasn't really angry.

"Not how I'd have chosen for them to find out," he sniffed. Then he relaxed into a smile. "But at least you're back." He took Penelope into his arms again. "Gods, it's been hell without you."

"Was it really four months?" Penelope asked, amazed. Percy just nodded, the look on his face saying it all.

"Then let's not ever let it be that long again!" Penelope declared, before turning to Luella. "Thank you! You don't know what this means to me, you know."

Luella smiled modestly. "It was nothing. Don't mention it."

Penelope just smiled in return as Percy started to lead her away.

"And now we've finished catching up with your family, I think it's about time you were introduced to mine. Mother, Father, there's someone I'd like you both to meet..." He led her over to where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were waiting with open arms, ready to welcome her.

And then the final member of the extended Weasley-Tyler-Potter-Martin-Lovegood-Granger-Stormosi dark-magic-fighting family arrived. Rianne Stormosi, arm in arm with...

"My god," said Deanna. "It's Dame Edna."

"Who's Dame Edna?" asked Ron.

"Australian novelty performer," Harry explained. He looked at where Deanna was staring. "Looks an awful lot like that."

Everyone else turned to look. And stare. It was none other than Gilderoy Lockhart. In a sparkly set of deep blue witches' robes, his hair tied back and hidden under a golden

turban, a handbag over one arm, his face covered in make-up and a pair of emerald green high heeled shoes on his feet.

"Careful there, Martha," Rianne was saying. "You know you're not used to walking in these shoes yet. Don't want you to fall, do we now?"

"Martha?" the older Weasleys said in unison, staring at this apparition in fascination.

"Professor Lockhart?" Hermione gasped in horror. She ran forward to get a better look at him before turning to Rianne in fury. "What have you done to him?" she yelled at her.

"Gave her a make-over," yawned Rianne. She noticed that Hermione looked ready to slap her. "What? Look, he... she... wants to be a woman. Deal! Oh, Martha, this is Hermione Granger. Hermione, meet Martha Lockhart."

"Hello, dear!" Lockhart beamed. He traced an expertly manicured finger along her hair. "You must tell me how you manage to get your hair to look so nice! It looks lovely."

"Er... thanks," said Hermione, too stunned to know how to react. "Erm... who did your outfit?"

"Rianne here, mostly, with a little help from a rather nice young lady called Marlie. And do you know, they showed me the funniest thing. They took me to this little room, with a big mirror, and lots of clothes and hair styling equipment, and it was covered, from floor to ceiling, in all these pictures of me! Can you believe it?" Lockhart laughed. "Anyway, they set to work straight away, Marlie changing the men's shoes there into proper women's ones, and then adapting the robes too, and the two of them set to work making me over. Very good at it they were too, I must say. Do you like it?"

"It's lovely," lied Hermione.

From a safe distance, Deanna and Luella were watching all this with Marlie.

"Do I detect your handiwork in all this, Marls?" Deanna remarked.

"Oh yeah," nodded Marlie. "He wanted a make-over from an expert and hey, who was I to deny my services?"

"Thought you preferred him male?" Luella teased.

Marlie just shrugged. "Well, you can go off people. Anyway," she sniffed, brushing her hair back over her shoulder, "he kept pronouncing my name wrong. Kept calling me Mar-leen," She folded her arms, a little bit miffed. "I hate being called Mar-leen."

Snape was last to arrive. He looked Lockhart up and down. He didn't look surprised.

"I always did wonder about you, Gilderoy."

"Martha," Rianne corrected him. "He's called Martha now. Martha, this is Professor Severus Snape. He teaches Potions."

"Does he now?" Lockhart beamed. "Are you the one I need to see about a Sex Change Potion?"

Snape looked Lockhart over. "You seem to be managing rather well without one so far."

"I do?" Lockhart clasped his hands to his chest. "Oh, thank you! You are so kind!"

"Don't mention it, Gil - sorry, Martha."

Mrs. Weasley approached Snape. "Is there nothing that can be done for him?" she asked sadly. "You know, to bring his memories back?" Dumbledore had already broken the news about Lockhart's amnesia to the Weasleys.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Weasley," said Snape gravely, successfully managing to conceal a smirk. "All that can be done is to hope his memories return eventually. Of course, if he's happy with his new identity, he may as well continue in it."

"Seems such a shame though," sighed Mrs. Weasley. "Such a waste of a talent. I mean, look at him, he looks ridiculous."

"No change there then," Snape and Mr. Weasley said in unison, trying to look innocent as Mrs. Weasley glared at them both.

And then the main doors opened and a shadow fell across the room that cut all conversation dead in its tracks. Everyone turned to look and let their voices die away as they saw just who had arrived to gatecrash the party. Silhouetted in the doorway was the formidable form of Lucius Malfoy. And he did not look pleased.

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Instinctively, everyone drew closer to Dumbledore. While Lucius was unlikely to start flinging hexes around in the middle of a school, you could never tell, and he didn't seem to be in a good mood. Trailing behind him was a small, diminutive creature with big eyes and pointy ears. It looked like it had been in a fight. A very one-sided fight.

"What is that?" whispered Hermione.

"A house elf," Marlie told her. "We keep them as servants, my mum's got one. They don't all look like they've been steam rolled though," she added hastily as Hermione's eyes flared in righteous indignation. The terrified elf retired to a quiet corner, staring wide-eyed as Lucius came to do battle.

He strode in, his face a very mask of rage, and pointed a finger at Dumbledore.

"You!" he hissed. "You... you're suspended! And yet you dared to come back?"

"Not my idea, Lucius," Dumbledore replied affably. "The other governors asked me to come back. Well, I say asked. As soon as they heard that Arthur Weasley's daughter had been killed, I found myself deluged in a veritable avalanche of owls, all demanding I return at once. Apparently they had no confidence in anyone other than me to manage things. Rather strange things they had to say for themselves, Lucius. Some of them appeared to be under the distinct impression that you'd threatened their families if they hadn't pushed for my resignation in the first place."

Lucius snarled but soon regained his composure. "I may have informed some of the more recalcitrant members of the governing body that their children might be next if something was not done."

"Interesting," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "They told me that you'd said much the same thing when they debated expelling Miss Martin too. Most of them were under the impression she should have stayed too."

Lucius noticed Luella for the first time. "You're expelled, girl!" he snarled at her. Luella just smiled. She'd faced far worse, after all.

"Not any more," she said, casually twirling her wand. "But if you really want to break my wand in two again, you're quite welcome. Here," She tossed the wand over to him. All around the room, people began smirking. The story of where Luella's new wand had come from was known by now to most of them, as was the reason why it hadn't been buried with its maker. However, Lucius wasn't one of them. Sneering, he took the wand in hand and tried to snap it. Without success. He tried again. No luck. This time he applied more pressure, grunting with the strain. The wand stubbornly refused to budge. By now, the entire room was grinning, real Cheshire Cat grins, and Ginny and Hermione were both starting to giggle. Seeing this and driven to desperation, Lucius drew his own wand.

"Very well," he snarled. "Let's see how it stands up to this!" He pressed his wand tip against Luella's wand. "*Severo!*"

It proved to be the worst move he could have made. Magic exploded out of his wand, sending him flying backwards and Luella's wand flying in the opposite direction. Luella lost no time in retrieving it. It was completely undamaged.

Which was more than could be said for Lucius Malfoy's ego. The entire room had dissolved into a collective fit of laughter, and the general hilarity only increased as he picked himself up and glared at them all.

"I shall remember this!" he snarled at them.

"As will we, Lucius," grinned Snape. "For a very, very long time."

Lucius shot Snape a look of pure poison. Retrieving his own wand, he strode over to the Potions Master.

"You will pay for that, Snape. One day. I promise," hissed Lucius.

For a brief moment, something like fear flickered through Snape's eyes. But it was soon gone as he glanced over Lucius's shoulder and saw something Lucius was as yet unaware of.

"I wouldn't threaten me if I were you, Lucius," he replied calmly.

"Or you'll do what, Professor?" Lucius sneered.

"I?" Snape widened his eyes in mock innocence. "I will do nothing." He smiled maliciously at Lucius. "I'll leave it to her."

Lucius turned around. And saw that he wasn't the only visitor to the school. Standing in the doorway, a Hogwarts trunk which Luella recognised as hers floating by her side, was the figure of the one and only Caitlin Tyler. In her black Auror uniform, golden Commander-in-Chief badge fully visible. She had clearly been watching for a while.

"Getting into fights again, Lucius?" She stepped into the room, carefully pushing the chest to one side. "Better watch yourself. I wouldn't want to have to arrest you, would I?"

Lucius backed off. "Calm yourself," he said coldly. "I'm not interested in picking a fight with your beloved Severus."

"Glad to hear it," Caitlin replied. "Our public servants have a right to go about their lawful duties without having to deal with aggression from angry parents." She regarded him as one would a cockroach in one's kitchen. "So what are you here for exactly, if not to assault teachers?"

"On business," Lucius replied sharply, brushing the dust from his robes. "Inquiring as to why an expelled pupil is back, with a wand and wearing school uniform again. For which I have still to receive an adequate explanation!" He rounded on Luella. "Well, girl? Care to explain yourself?"

"Leave her alone," snapped Caitlin. "Speak to her with a civil tongue in your head or not at all."

"Stay out of this, Auror," Lucius hissed. "This is Hogwarts business." However, he did leave Luella alone, picking on Dumbledore instead. "Well, Headmaster?"

"Certainly, Lucius," Dumbledore replied, unmoved by his outburst. "You see, we have succeeded in halting the attacks for good, and not only that, we unmasked the real culprit and it wasn't Miss Martin here. So it was decided to allow her to return."

"I see," said Lucius, his voice not quite at absolute zero but not far off it. "And who, pray, was the real culprit?"

"Oh, the same person as last time," said Dumbledore. "Except this time he was acting through someone else. Using this diary."

He produced the diary again, watching Lucius's reaction very carefully indeed. Lucius, to give him his due, hid his desire to swear very well, no mean feat with Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape and Arthur Weasley watching him like hawks, and Caitlin Tyler standing right behind him.

Rianne, however, had noticed something else. Turning to one with more experience in these matters, she whispered to Marlie,

"Marls, what's up with the self-harming house elf?"

Marlie turned to look at the Malfoy house elf. He was staring at Harry, pointing first to the diary, then at Lucius, then promptly slapping himself around the face. Marlie frowned.

"Well, they're instructed to punish themselves if they're ever disloyal to their lawful masters, I wonder if that's it..."

Hermione gave a little gasp of horror. Harry, however, suddenly realised what the house elf was trying to tell him.

"Of course," he whispered. "That's it!" He looked at Lucius in an entirely different light. "It was you, wasn't it? You were the one who gave Ginny the diary. You slipped it into her Transfiguration book that day in Flourish and Blott's. That's why you picked a fight with Mr. Weasley. You wanted to cause a distraction so no one would notice."

As soon as he heard this, Mr. Weasley went pale and stepped forward, clearly intent on picking up where he'd left off back in August. "Is this true, Malfoy?" he barked, already drawing a fist back.

"Arthur!" cried Mrs. Weasley, holding him back. Snape joined her.

"I'd listen to your wife if I were you," he said through gritted teeth. "Lucius Malfoy's very dangerous when cornered. Best to let Caitlin get on with it."

"Is that a good idea, if he's so dangerous?" Mrs. Weasley asked. Snape shook his head.

"I wouldn't worry about her, she knows as many hexes as he does and she doesn't fight fair either," Snape told her.

Lucius had gone a very unusual shade of white, and was looking panic-stricken, his eyes darting from face to face. However, he refused to admit defeat.

"You'll never prove any of it," he snarled.

"Maybe not," said Caitlin, her voice dangerously soft as she stood right behind him, her face mere inches from his. "This time. But we'll be watching you, Malfoy. One step out of line, Malfoy, one tiny little mistake, the smallest infraction, and we'll have you. Mel's been after an excuse to have your hide for years. One chance, Lucius. That's all we need. So be careful out there. Got me?"

Lucius just glared at her.

"Good," Caitlin purred, turning his face towards her with a single finger. Her own face twisted into its own savage mask of fury. "Now get out of my sight!"

Lucius staggered back, before composing himself.

"Don't worry," he hissed. "I'm going! Dobby!" He called to his house-elf as he turned and stalked out. Whimpering, the house-elf scurried after him.

Cheering broke out as soon as he'd gone, with both Harry and Caitlin getting more than their fair share of pats on the back for standing up to him. Mr. Weasley in particular couldn't stop shaking her hand.

"Caitlin, I can't say how pleased I am to see you standing up to him like that! After all the trouble he's caused for my little girl this year...!"

"Arthur, don't worry," Caitlin reassured him. "I'm just doing my job. I only wish I could have nailed him for it," she sighed.

"Well, at least you know what sort of thing he's got lying around now," Mrs. Weasley pointed out. "Can't you get a warrant to raid his home or something?"

"Been done," sighed Caitlin. "He's too good. But we can but try." She noticed Snape watching her with a smile. "Hello there, Severus. So, what exactly makes you think I'll go running off to fight every wizard who dares to threaten you, then?"

Snape bowed. "I would never dare to presume that you'd fight all my battles for me, Caitlin." He raised his head and smiled. "But what I do know is that you'd go after Lucius Malfoy for *anyone*."

"True enough!" she laughed.

Harry, meanwhile, was tugging at Dumbledore's sleeve. "Sir," he asked, rather breathlessly. "could I borrow the diary for a bit? There's something I need to do."

"Certainly," replied Dumbledore, passing him the book. "Be careful, won't you, we do need it back."

"I will," Harry promised as he ran for the doors.

"Where are you going?" asked Caitlin, alarmed.

"I won't be long, Mrs. Tyler!" he called back. "I just need to repay a favour."

"Well, be careful, won't you?" she warned him. "Lucius Malfoy is a very dangerous wizard. If he tries anything, call me. I'll be watching from the door way."

"I will!" called Harry as he ran out of the door, stopping only to remove his right shoe and sock, and use the sock to wrap the diary in.

"What is he doing?" asked Rianne. "Trying to knock Malfoy out with the smell?"

Marlie, however, began to understand. "I think I see," she said thoughtfully. She turned to Hermione. "It's alright, you can stop worrying. That house elf's troubles might just be over." Sure enough, Marlie was proved right. Caitlin, who was watching from the door way, gave a shriek of delight.

"Harry, you absolute genius!" she cried. "Lily and James would have been so proud!"

Then came a roar of fury from Lucius.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

Caitlin's expression turned from delight to alarm as she produced her wand and stepped forward. But she needn't have worried. Next was the sound of the house elf, Dobby, subservient and quivering no more.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a very loud bang and the sound of Lucius Malfoy cursing, and not in the magical sense either.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter! You shall go now!"

More swearing from Lucius. Then silence out there. Caitlin turned and rejoined them.

"Perfect," she laughed. "Just perfect! Not only is he totally humiliated, but Narcissa's going to hit the roof when she finds out what's happened!"

"Why, what did he do?" asked Hermione.

"Set the house elf free," Caitlin told her. "He tricked Lucius into giving the diary, still wrapped in a sock, to the house elf. And, of course, when you give a house elf clothes..."

"You release them!" Marlie laughed. "Of course! Cool!"

Harry returned, jubilantly waving the diary above his head. "I did it! I freed Dobby!" he laughed, as he presented Dumbledore with the diary once more.

"You did indeed," Dumbledore smiled. "Well done, Harry."

"He's not having a good day, is he?" Deanna remarked. "What else is going to go wrong for him, do you think?"

"Quite a bit," Dumbledore told her. "I mentioned earlier that the other governors all owed me last night. Well, what I haven't yet told you is that every single one is going to submit a motion to sack Lucius Malfoy." He waited for the assorted cheers to subside before continuing.

"Indeed. This of course means that Miss Weasley's total exoneration and Miss Martin's reinstatement are virtually guaranteed. However, it also has one other consequence. It means we're going to need a new parent governor." He fixed his eye on Caitlin and the Weasleys.

"Not me," said Caitlin swiftly. "Unlike Malfoy, I actually have a full-time job to go to."

"Same here," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Ever since my PA quit last month, I've been up to my neck in work. Last thing I need's another responsibility."

All eyes turned to Mrs. Weasley, who immediately started blushing. "Surely not!" she gasped. "I mean... I couldn't possibly... I've got no experience! And a household to run!"

"Molly, I can assure you that no specific experience is required for the position," Dumbledore told her. "Personal qualities are far more important, and you have them in abundance."

"Oh! But what about this lot?" She indicated her husband and children.

"We're at school half the time anyway!" Ron pointed out. "We'll manage."

"Yeah, don't worry about us!" Ginny nudged her mother. "Go for it, you'd be good!"

"Well..." Mrs. Weasley hesitated, looking torn. It was Rianne who finally swung it.

"Mrs. Weasley," she began, "what if I could get you someone to pop in and do some housework for you? You know, cleaning, tidying, ironing, all that sort of thing."

"Could you?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "How?"

Rianne indicated Lockhart. "Mrs. Lockhart here. I mean, she was going to come and live with us, act as our live-in housekeeper, take over all the housework from Debra so she can finally get a decent job, well she still is, but what if I sent her over to your place a couple of days a week to help you out? Free up some time to go to governors' meetings for you."

"Really? Oh, but I couldn't possibly..." Mrs. Weasley protested.

"It's no trouble!" Rianne smiled. She turned to Lockhart. "Sound like a good idea to you?"

"Sounds great fun!" Lockhart beamed, rather vacantly. "When can I start?"

"As soon as everything's sorted out," Rianne promised.

Mrs. Weasley arrived at a decision.

"Well, if you're sure you don't mind..."

"Not at all!" smiled Rianne.

"Well, in that case..." Mrs. Weasley turned to Dumbledore with a smile. "Very well, Albus. I'll stand!"

"Thank you, Molly." Dumbledore smiled. "I'm sure you'll do very well."

"Yay!" yelled Ron and Ginny together.

"Mum's going to be a governor!" shouted Ginny.

"Won't Malfoy be sick as pigs when he hears this!" laughed Ron.

Mr. Weasley looked rather thoughtful.

"Did you say your sister Debra was looking for a job?"

Rianne nodded. "That's right. She's got a part-time one in the local occult store, but it's not what she's really after. Only she can't go for anything better because she's got to look after Dad. That's why I wanted Lockhart as a housekeeper."

"Organised, is she?"

"Without doubt."

"Good with people?"

"Unfailingly courteous."

"Intelligent?"

Rianne snorted. "Please. Of course she is."

"Interested in a Ministry job? Specifically, personal assistant to the Head of the Department of Misuse of Muggle Artefacts?"

"She'd love the idea," Rianne laughed.

"Excellent!" sighed Mr. Weasley. "I'll write and ask her to send a CV today! Good PAs are so hard to come by, you know, Molly."

"Never know, I might need one if I'm to be a school governor," laughed Mrs. Weasley, linking arms with her husband and moving away.

Caitlin turned to Luella as the little group began to break up, Dumbledore inviting them all in for the breakfast feast.

"Well! I gather you and Harry are quite the heroes of the hour!"

"Harry killed a Basilisk," Luella told her.

"And Lu used Lord Voldemort's own hex against him!" Harry said.

Caitlin grinned knowingly at Luella. "Nice to know all the training paid off!"

"I had help," Luella admitted. "Marlie's necklace saved me."

Caitlin put her arms around both Harry and Luella. "Well, however you managed it, I am immensely proud of you both. Luella, you are a genius. And as for you, Harry..." She stopped and turned to look him straight in the eye. "That was incredibly brave of you. Your parents would have been proud."

Harry didn't answer, too overcome with embarrassment and pride to string a coherent reply together. Caitlin smiled and led him into the Great Hall, where a party was already in full swing.

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Not everyone was celebrating, however. As the Entrance Hall cleared, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson emerged from their hiding place. They'd heard everything, including Lucius Malfoy's public humiliation and loss of the family house elf.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be your father when he gets home," commented Pansy. "If my dad lost the family house elf, my mum'd kill him."

Draco didn't answer. He was still staring at the doorway which his father had so unceremoniously left by.

"Draco?" Pansy prodded. "What's up?"

"He started it all," said Draco quietly. "My father. Planted the diary."

"Don't tell me you were surprised," said Pansy derisively. "You know how eager he was to get Martin expelled."

"He could have killed Lovegood," said Draco. "And Weasley too. I don't care about the others, but Weasley and Lovegood..." He rounded on Pansy. "They're part of us, Pansy! You know, Slytherins." Draco folded his arms, staring at his feet. "I never thought he'd go for fellow Slytherins."

"You went for Martin," Pansy not unreasonably pointed out.

"That's different," Draco waved her objections aside dismissively. "She's... one of them. The enemy. You know, Tal-y-Rhys. Weasley and Lovegood weren't."

"They're allied to them," Pansy said. "Don't they know not to get in the line of fire yet?"

"That's not the point!" snapped Draco. "I didn't know my father could do that. I mean, who knew who the diary could have gone after? It could think for itself, after all."

Anything could have happened." He shook his head. "I didn't think he was like that. Didn't think he could be so callous over a political point."

"Draco, you're getting soft in your old age," Pansy teased.

"Maybe," said Draco quietly. "Or maybe I don't want to be known as the son of a murderer." He motioned for Pansy to follow as he headed into the Great Hall. Pansy trailed after him, pausing to stare at the still open doors. She wasn't sure just what had happened, but something momentous had just taken place, as if the certainties of over a thousand years had just crumbled entirely into the dust. Turning away, she followed Draco out.

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The breakfast celebration went on for quite some time. Word had already got around, and by now most of the school had heard an edited version of the story of how Harry and Luella had made their way to the Chamber and taken on Voldemort and a Basilisk. When Luella and Harry themselves made an entrance, all hell broke loose as the cheering nearly lifted the roof off. Harry scurried over to the relative safety of the Gryffindor table as soon as possible, where he found himself mobbed by his housemates. Luella, meanwhile, too glad to be back to get embarrassed, tweaked her appearance with a weak Glamour and proceeded across the room to the Slytherin table, all the while soaking in the applause like a true star. Grinning with pride, Caitlin followed her over, murmuring "Vive la difference."

The feast proceeded in like fashion, with much food and drink being consumed despite the early hour, much cheering and merriment, and Luella retelling the story of what had happened in the Chamber for Caitlin's benefit.

"Amazing," said Caitlin. "Truly amazing. I am very impressed. Well done! What happened to the sword?"

"In the trophy cabinet," Deanna told her, slightly sulky. "I wanted to keep it, but Dumbledore and Snape both reckoned I was 'too young'. Huh."

"Probably worried you might decapitate someone with it," Caitlin remarked with a smile.

"Mother!" Deanna protested. "Have you not taught me better than that? As if I'd lose control with it and accidentally hurt someone!"

"It's not the accidental injuries that bother me," said Caitlin, scrutinising her daughter with a knowing look that spoke volumes. Deanna got her meaning at once and immediately began protesting again, before changing tactics and trying to persuade her mother that it was a crying shame to keep such a fantastic sword locked up in a cabinet, going to waste like that. Marlie took advantage of the situation to motion Rianne away.

"What's up, Marls?" she asked. "You look concerned."

Marlie indicated Lockhart, sitting vacantly next to Rianne, beaming at everyone in sight, happily oblivious to the stares they were giving him.

"Well, it's all very well and good him going off to be your housekeeper and all, but that leaves us with a problem, does it not?"

"I can't imagine what," remarked Rianne. "We get our housework done for us, Debs can get a cool new Ministry job with Mr. Weasley, and next year, who knows, we might even get a competent and not-evil Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Marls, there is no downside here."

"There is," sighed Marlie. "Slyths cannot live on the sweepstake alone, especially when I have to try and work on that TV I promised Ginny. Bloody thing keeps sucking all the magic out of the magical field, rendering all magic useless in its vicinity. I'll need money to try and fix the thing, and our collective incomes are about to take a nosedive. Syndicate, Ri, Syndicate."

"Syndicate..." Rianne's face fell. "Darn."

"Exactly. With Lockhart gone, that's no assignments to forge, and no money for us. What do we do, Ri?" Marlie asked.

"Well, we could wind it up..." sighed Rianne. "Or, we could find another teacher who everyone finds dull and who sets pointless assignments, who probably won't notice."

"Potions?" Marlie suggested.

"Don't be a fool, Snape would see straight through it. Besides," and here Rianne looked at Marlie rather pointedly, "some of us happen to like Potions."

"OK, OK, point taken," sniffed Marlie. She gave some thought to all the other lessons she found tedious. Most of them, which didn't get her very far. "Astronomy's a bit pointless, in my view, but you can't really fake that. Anyway, suppose not everyone has the benefit of my vast scientific expertise, after all. Same with Herbology, it's all too practical."

"Exactly," smiled Rianne, something evidently on her mind. "Think largely theoretical subjects."

"Theory... hmm. That's most of them out, they virtually all require some practical work, apart from..." It hit her. "History of Magic! Only the most dull subject in the school!"

"Precisely," purred Rianne. "It's compulsory, dull and eminently fakeable. They'll be falling on their knees to get out of the homework, and more importantly, throwing their money at us."

"Cool!" laughed Marls. She shook Rianne by the hand. "We are geniuses."

"What are you two doing over there?" Caitlin called over. "Up to something?"

"Me? Up to something?" Marlie fluttered her eyelids. "As if!"

"Silly me, you'd never even dream of plotting behind someone's back, would you?" Caitlin looked at her knowingly. "What were you two talking about anyway?"

"History of Magic," Rianne replied promptly. Caitlin rolled her eyes.

"Now I know you were planning something. Might I ask why?"

"Oh, just discussing a few study tips. I'm going to help Marls improve her marks." Rianne said, remaining studiously offhand.

Caitlin was not convinced, but did not press the point. "I see. Well, good luck with it. Rianne, I was just discussing with Deanna the possibility of us borrowing Lockhart as well. Mostly during the holidays, of course."

"Don't see why not," Rianne shrugged. "If anyone needs a housekeeper, it's surely you guys."

"Here, here," Deanna commented. Caitlin, blushing, swiftly looked away to where Lydia and Ginny were involved in an argument with Autumn.

"Something up?"

"I still say they won't like it!" Autumn was insisting. "You know what the Ministry's like, put a toe out of line and they're on to you! Surely they'll want to punish her!"

"Autumn, you're overreacting, anyway it wasn't her curse, was it? It was his, she just deflected it." Lydia dismissed her friend's concerns.

Ginny noticed Caitlin watching them, and motioned for them both to be quiet.

"Look, let's just ask her and have done!" She turned to Caitlin with a smile. "Mrs. Tyler, what's the Ministry position on Unforgivable Curses?"

Caitlin frowned. "Ginny, they're strictly illegal and using them on a fellow human without authorisation from the Ministry will earn you ten years in Azkaban. Surely you know that, and if you don't, Lydia will."

"Told you!" hissed Autumn. "We'll never see her again!"

"See who again?" Caitlin asked.

"Luella," said Lydia. "Autumn reckons that she's going to get in terrible trouble for using the Killing Curse on Tom Riddle."

This got Luella's attention immediately. "I'm not, am I?"

"No of course not," Caitlin reassured her.

"See?" Lydia told Autumn. "Said she'd be fine. After all, she was acting in self-defence."

"Precisely," smiled Caitlin. "See, while the Ministry may be dead set against anyone using them, you're forgetting that Melissa Lovegood decides who in practice gets prosecuted. And she is of the opinion that anything which saves us having to deal with dangerous dark mages is a good thing. So, she's made it official policy that if anyone uses an Unforgivable against you without proper authorisation, you are entitled to use any means necessary to defend yourself. If that involves turning their own curse against them, then so be it. Anyone who flings curses like that around deserves all they get. Anyway, you're forgetting something. Unforgivables are forbidden when used on humans. But when used on inanimate objects, even ones that have been enchanted..."

"They're perfectly acceptable!" finished Luella.

"Exactly. Autumn, dear, you can stop worrying," Caitlin told her.

Autumn appeared relieved by this, although more than a little embarrassed as Ginny and Lydia began to tease her. However, they didn't get the chance to do much. At the far end of the Hall, Dumbledore was getting to his feet.

The entire room fell silent as the Headmaster called for attention.

"Thank you, children, thank you," he smiled at them. "Now, as most of you must surely by now be aware, this is a day of celebration. We have found out who was causing the attacks, and they have been duly punished. Suffice it to say that there will be no more Petrifications." He waited until the cheering died down before continuing.

"It is the wish of all staff members, including myself, that life at Hogwarts should return to normal. However, there will be a few minor changes. As a special treat, this year's exams have been cancelled. All students, including OWLs and NEWTs students, will receive a mark from their teachers based on their performance throughout the year instead, as a recognition of the fact that Hogwarts has not been conducive to study this year."

More cheering this time. In fact, the only person not cheering was Hermione, who was looking rather disappointed.

"All that revision for nothing!" she complained.

Harry and Ron both shook their heads.

"Hermione, you're nuts," said Ron, not without affection.

Dumbledore moved on to his next point.

"Lessons shall continue as usual, until the end of term. However, there shall be no further lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts this year as Professor Lockhart has unfortunately been involved in a regrettable accident resulting in total amnesia, and is

thus unable to teach." This time the cheers nearly lifted the roof off, as quite a few of the teachers joined in. And at the staff table, observers were treated to the rare sight of Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall actually turning to each other, and smiling like old friends.

And then Dumbledore arrived at his final point.

"It only remains to thank and reward the brave, cunning and sublimely talented students who were responsible for saving the school from closure and apprehending the villain of the piece. Each of them will receive a Special Award for Services to the School. For being the first to work out how the attacks were being committed, come forward Miss Hermione Granger."

Hermione got to her feet, her face a bright shade of pink as she went up to get her award.

"But I didn't really do anything!" she gasped as she shook the Headmaster's hand.

"You saved Miss Lovegood's life," Dumbledore replied. "And that in turn saved Miss Martin. I think that deserves some kind of recognition, don't you?"

Hermione didn't answer as she took the silver shield, rather embarrassed at being singled out yet at the same time immensely proud as she slipped back to the Gryffindor table.

"Next, for being the first to work out who was behind the attacks, and for providing the means by which they were halted, Miss Marlene Lovegood."

No shyness or modesty here! Flinging back her hair, Marlie leapt to her feet and strutted up to the front as if it was only her natural right to be there. She accepted the award with a smile and turned to the applauding school, holding her necklace up for them all to see.

"Not just a pretty face, am I?" she purred, before sauntering equally leisurely back to her seat, soaking up the applause on the way.

"Next, for organising the raid that finally put paid to the attacks once and for all, Miss Rianne Stormosi."

Rianne accepted hers with good grace, bowing to the audience and returning to her seat as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

"For providing vital moral support and magical back up, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Deanna Tyler."

Ron and Deanna got up simultaneously for theirs, reaching the front at the same time. Deanna waited patiently as Ron got his, before accepting her own from the Headmaster in turn. As he shook her hand, he leaned forward, whispering to her, "Well done, Deanna. You do your family proud."

"Thanks!" she smiled, it not occurring to her to wonder just why he was referring to her family when, as far as she knew, he was not a part of it. Mainly because out of the corner of her eye, she noted Professor Snape watching her, and the look of undisguised pride in his eyes wiped out every other thought from her mind. I did it, she thought. I made him proud of me. All I need to do now is set him up with Mum, and I'm set for life and a family! But maybe that was a task for next year.

Finally, Dumbledore turned to the last two silver awards on the staff table. No prizes for guessing who they were for.

"And last but certainly not least, prizes for those two students who actually did the immensely challenging, not to mention near-fatal, job of rescuing Ginny Weasley and halting the attacks. Mr. Harry Potter, Slayer of the Basilisk, and Miss Luella Martin, Exorcisor of Lord Voldemort's school diary."

Harry and Luella both got to their feet, shaking like mad but supremely happy. And as they received their awards, the boy and girl, Gryffindor and Slytherin, met each other's eyes. And then, totally spontaneously, Harry stepped forward and hesitantly held out his hand. Luella took it, shook his hand, and looked straight into his eyes.

And promptly found herself abandoning all normal Slytherin reserve as she pulled him forward into a hug, giving him a kiss on the cheek before letting him go.

Harry staggered back in shock, rearranging his glasses, trying to ignore the smirking and giggling coming from the Gryffindor table.

"Thanks!" he gasped, breathless.

"Don't mention it, mate." Luella grinned, before turning to go to her own table. However, Dumbledore prevented her.

"Not yet, Miss Martin. There is one more thing to present." Dumbledore cleared his throat before continuing. "It has been decided to present the House Cup now, instead of waiting until the end of term. And one of you will need to collect it on behalf of your house."

Harry and Luella exchanged glances. This could mean trouble. Last night had united the two rival houses in a way that transcended all the normal petty squabbles. Presenting the house trophy now could only re-open all the old wounds. Was the fragile state of peace to be broken so soon?

"Now," said Dumbledore, "as it currently stands, Gryffindor leads Slytherin by fifty points. However, I have a few more points to give out."

All along the Slytherin table, students began to groan. This had happened last year, and Slytherin had seen the Cup snatched from them by a mere ten points, earned by Neville Longbottom of all people. However, this time Gryffindor were leading, and it had not escaped a few of the more observant Slytherins that the rescue party had been three-fifths Slytherin. So it was that not a few ears were pricked in anticipation.

"To Miss Hermione Granger and Miss Marlene Lovegood, twenty points each."

Cheering broke out at this, but it was strangely muted. No change in the relative positions of the two houses.

"To Miss Rianne Stormosi, Miss Deanna Tyler and Mr. Ronald Weasley, fifty points each."

The Gryffindor table applauded, but they found themselves drowned out by the Slytherins, who had wasted no time in doing the necessary maths.

"We're level!" Marlie shrieked. She wasn't alone. All along the table, Slytherins were shouting, clapping and generally patting each other on the back.

Dumbledore smiled genially as he waited for the applause to die down. Finally, the hall was quiet enough for him to speak once more.

"And finally, to Mr. Harry Potter and Miss Luella Martin..." He paused, watching the entire school perched on the edge of their seats. "One hundred points each."

The school erupted into cheering as the implications dawned on everyone. There was no outright winner. It was... a draw.

"Which means," Dumbledore continued, "that the final scores are exactly level. And, as is customary on these occasions..."

"Scissors, paper, stone to decide the winner!" Fred yelled from the Gryffindor table.

Dumbledore smiled at him. "No, not scissors, paper, stone."

"Arm wrestling?" suggested George.

"No," said Dumbledore. "Given that we have a draw on our hands, the only fair solution is to award the House Cup jointly to both Houses. Miss Martin, Mr. Potter, if you could come and collect the trophy?"

Harry and Luella both stepped forward in a state of shock as the school went nuts around them, and the banners changed into a riot of green and silver, red and gold. The Cup was waiting, with ribbons of both sets of house colours tied to it. And as Harry and Luella lifted the trophy together, the school, as one, got to its feet to give them a standing ovation.

"Now this is what I call a victory!" Luella whispered.

"Even when it's a draw?" asked Harry, grinning.

Luella smiled at him. "Well, you know. It wouldn't feel right claiming an outright victory. Not when we both know you were needed as much I was. Who knows, maybe more."

Harry had to agree. This was the best result, indeed, the fairest result. Honours were even. Victory, rather than a prize to be jealously fought over, was one to be shared. A quick look at the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables confirmed that everyone seemed to be thinking the same. Even Malfoy was quietly applauding, with not a glare of malice in sight. It was, without a doubt, the most eagerly heralded draw in Hogwarts history.

"Shame we have to go back to separate tables," Luella remarked.

"Then let's not," said Harry.

Luella looked at him in surprise. "Why, what did you have in mind?"

Harry indicated the Gryffindors and Slytherins, many of whom were now leaving their tables and swarming towards them.

"How about a victory parade? A joint one, obviously."

"Like we have any choice?" Luella sighed, as the massed throng of Slytherins and Gryffindors reached them and promptly started hugging them, patting them on the back, singing "For S/he's A Jolly Good Fellow" and generally mobbing them. Luella found the cup being taken off her by Marlie and Fred, who promptly began passing it around to everyone in sight. We'll never see it again, she thought wryly. However, she didn't have time to think about the cup's eventual fate. Mike Lovegood and Marcus Flint had just materialised on either side of her and hoisted her on to their shoulders, with Deanna and Rianne encouraging them.

"Careful there!" Rianne warned them. "Last thing you want is to drop the Saviour of Slytherin."

"As if we would!" Mike called cheerfully, before almost proving Rianne right as he walked into the Hufflepuff table. Fortunately, Flint prevented Luella from falling.

"Lovegood, you idiot!"

"Sorry, Flinty."

"Sorry won't save you from the wrath of Our Lady of Slytherin, will it?" Flint snapped at him.

"Who's that?" asked Luella.

"You, you fool." Flint grunted as he adjusted his shoulder to support her weight. "Now hold still. You've got a crowd to wave to."

Fred and George, not to be outdone, had done likewise with Harry, carrying him on their shoulders, with the lid of the House Cup on his head. And with that, Slytherin and Gryffindor united in one riot of colour, the rejoicing students made their way outside for what promised to be the party of the decade.

Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall watched them go.

"Reckon there's any chance of getting any work out of them today?" Minerva asked half-heartedly.

"Not a chance," yawned Severus. "Any minute now, Marlene Lovegood will wheel out the Slytherin stereo system and then we can kiss any productivity goodbye."

"I just saw her slip off towards the dungeons with Ginny Weasley and her friends," said Minerva.

"I rest my case."

Minerva looked at the doorway which the four Slytherins had left by. "Oh dear." Getting up, she picked up her hat and planted it on her head very firmly. "That settles it. I am not putting up with what the younger generation seems to think passes for music all day. Come on, Severus. We're going down the pub."

"What?" Severus asked, as he found himself dragged to his feet.

"I said, we're going down the pub," Minerva repeated. "We're leaving them to it. Come on, let's go. Don't tell me you want to listen to that music with rocks in all day."

"Well, no," Severus admitted. He looked thoughtful for a moment, before giving in with a smile. "Alright then. Let's go. Just don't get drunk on me, will you? I don't want a repeat of the staff Christmas party of two years ago."

Minerva went rather pink at this. However, her blushes were saved by Caitlin Tyler's arrival.

"Where are you two off to then?" she enquired. "Anywhere interesting? Or are you joining the party?"

"We're going to the Three Broomsticks," Severus informed her. "Fleeing the invasion of the Things from Planet Youth Culture."

Caitlin patted his arm. "You'll adapt to the twentieth century sooner or later." She looked rather strangely at them both. "Hang on, did you say you were going down the pub? That's not like you both."

"Well, if it provides a sanctuary from the rabble..." Minerva started to say, but Severus interrupted her.

"It's a date," he told her, completely straight-faced. "Minerva's been feeling rather lonely lately, as have I, so we've decided to embark on a torrid affair."

"Severus!" Minerva shrieked, this time going from pink to a deep shade of vermilion.

"Sorry, Minerva, but the world had to know sooner or later," Severus replied breezily. "I've never been a toy-boy before, it's quite a novel experience."

Caitlin wasn't quite sure whether to believe him or not. However, she knew Severus well enough to guess when he was teasing.

"Congratulations to you both then," she remarked with a smile. "Just one thing. On no account should you let him drink anything stronger than a Butterbeer shandy - he has this disturbing tendency to strip naked after a few drinks and start singing 'Slytherins Are Sexier' with a pointy hat clutched to his, er, gentleman's bits."

"Caitlin!" snapped Severus. "Stop it!"

"I will when you will," she smiled innocently.

"Stop it, both of you!" said Minerva firmly. "Honestly, you haven't changed a bit, either of you, forever bickering and teasing each other!"

Severus and Caitlin both smiled rather indulgently at this.

"Now that takes me back a few years," said Caitlin.

"Almost like being back at school," Severus agreed.

"We are," Caitlin pointed out.

"But not as students, thankfully," sighed Minerva.

"Indeed," came the cheery voice of Albus Dumbledore. "But nevertheless, it's nice to see you both back on your usual terms. Makes a change from recent behaviour."

Severus froze immediately, while Caitlin looked guiltily away. Somehow, he must have found out what had happened between them earlier. And yet, he didn't seem to be blaming anyone. Much to both Caitlin and Severus's relief.

"I'd better be going," said Caitlin, just a little too brightly. "I need to get back to work, I only came here to drop Luella's things off."

"Not at all," Dumbledore replied. "I've already updated Melissa and she's given you the day off. Which you're going to spend with us."

"I am?" asked Caitlin in a daze.

"Certainly!" laughed Dumbledore. "You're joining me, and Minerva and Severus in Hogsmeade, where we're going for a celebratory drink." He extended a hand to her, inviting her to join them. Resigned to the inevitable, and secretly rather pleased to be invited, Caitlin decided to accept.

"Alright then," she grinned as she allowed herself to be led away. Dumbledore smiled, and took Minerva by the arm, leaving Caitlin and Severus together. Severus extended an arm to her.

"May I have the pleasure?"

"Sure Minerva won't get jealous?" she teased as she slipped her arm around his.

"Hardly," he replied. "I'm not really one for older women, after all."

"Oh, I knew that," Caitlin smiled. "Besides, it wouldn't be Minerva McGonagall anyway."

"And why is that?" Severus enquired.

"She's been seeing Madam Hooch since before you started teaching here," Caitlin grinned.

"What?" snapped Severus. "Is that true?"

"Absolutely," Caitlin nodded. "Albus told me himself."

"Good gods," Severus sighed. "The things that go on in this place that no one ever tells me about! You'll be telling me George Flitwick and Libitina Vector are an item next. No," he held up a finger as she started to speak, still with that same grin on her face, "don't tell me. I'd rather not know that the staff room is a seething hotbed of lust, and that everyone except me and Binns is getting some."

"It doesn't have to be that way," she said softly, before quickly looking away, wondering what on earth had possessed her. "Oh look, Severus, I'm sorry, forget I said anything."

Severus stopped walking, and turned to look at her. For a long while, he just stared into her eyes, his face giving nothing away. When he did speak, it was in firm, measured, very controlled tones.

"Caitlin, right now, I happen to be in a very good mood. Let's not spoil it. Let's just enjoy ourselves for once. Let's just have an enjoyable day out. Just this once."

Caitlin smiled, inwardly rather relieved. "Sounds good to me. Shall we go?" She took his arm once more, and together, the two of them left the Great Hall, and headed out into the sunshine.

FINIS

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PDF created and edited by Tardas
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Book Four will be added when the writer completes her work.

(Currently she has 24 chapters completed and these can be found by searching for J. K. Rowling - Harry Potter & Slytherin Rising Part 4 Year of the Cat.pdf or by going to www.fanfic.com)